

# BANDWAGON

THE JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2000

LUDI PURI

## GENTRY BROS. JAS. PATTERSON

OFFICIAL PROGRAM  
AND  
SOUVENIR BOOKLET

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# BANDWAGON

## THE JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

Vol. 44, No. 5

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2000

### FRED D. PFENING, JR. EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

Fred D. Pfening III, Managing Editor Joseph T. Bradbury, Associate Editor  
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### SEASON'S REVIEW HELP

Work will soon begin on the 2000 Circus Year in Review. The editor is in need of information, newspaper ads and photographs on circuses that toured in 2000.

Information on small shows and those from Mexico is needed. We especially want material on Hendricks Bros. and Circus Hope.

Information on animal rights activity as well as any other problems affecting circuses will be appreciated. Send material to the editor.

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I certify the statements made by me above are correct and complete. (signed) Fred D. Pfening, Jr, publisher. (10-2-00)



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by James W. Raab

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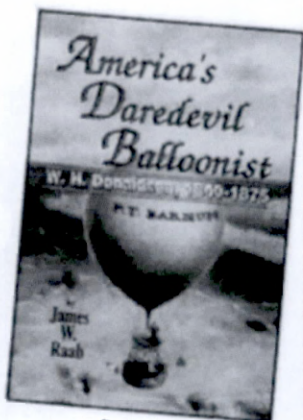
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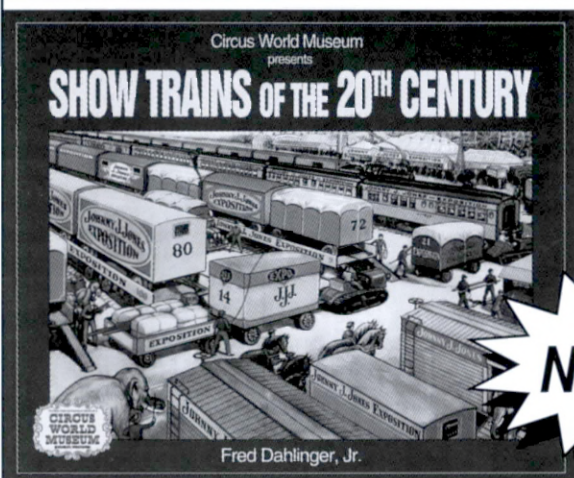
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# Joe Pentland THE AMERICAN CLOWN

By Stuart Thayer

Seven years was a common term of apprenticeship in the early nineteenth century. In that time a boy in his teens, or younger, supposedly could learn the trade of his master. He received no pay beyond pocket money, but was provided with room and board and tools. Apprenticeships were capital to the master, and were bought, sold and transferred. We have found circus apprenticeships as short as two years, and as long as eight in our research.

A fourteen year-old boy named Joseph Pentland or Pendleton bound himself to circus owner Aaron Turner of Danbury, Connecticut from 1830 to 1837. Beginning his career as a balancer (what we now call a juggler), he learned rope-walking, singing, ventriloquism and clowning during his apprenticeship. He was born in Boston in 1816, and rose to become famous as a clown and circus manager before he retired in 1871.

Pentland's real name could have been Pendleton; he was so listed in Turner's advertising in 1830 and 1831. That these could have been errors in spelling by the agent or the printer is possible; these were the usual source of misspellings. However, for such usage to extend itself over two seasons seems to be begging the question.

Those first two seasons saw him juggling, as we mentioned, and in 1831 he added a song, "The Good Old Days of Adam and Eve," to the program. After Turner ended his 1831 season, Pendleton and one of the rid-

ers, Jackson, switched to the Tremont Circus Company, which showed in Providence in December, and in Boston the first four months of 1832, and again that December. Here he was called Pentland, and appeared under that name henceforth.

One of the problems that arise for the researcher in delineating Turner's progress and programs is that he was a most impecunious operator and his ads are few. Nor

Daguerrotype (ca. 1848) of Joe Pentland. Collection of Dr. Bruce Lundberg.



have we found a single handbill for him before his partnership with James M. June in 1835. Thus, though it appears that Pentland was with the circus, we find no mention of him from 1833 through 1835.

Despite Turner's proclivities, we have two descriptions of his 1836 show. They come from George Cole, an observer, and P. T. Barnum, who served as Turner's treasurer in that season. Cole, a sometimes showman, described Turner's operation as having a seventy-five foot round top, eight-high seats (no reserves), a forty-foot ring, twenty-five cents admission, and lighting by candles.

Barnum, the treasurer and ticket seller (at \$30 a month and 20% of the profits), hired Pentland in December, 1836, when Turner's company ended its season in Columbia, South Carolina. This appears to be the end of Pentland's apprenticeship.

Using the title "Grand Scientific and Musical Theatre," and traveling in four wagons he purchased from Turner, Barnum, toured the South until May, 1837. He described Pentland, "besides being a capital clown, was celebrated as a ventriloquist, comic singer, balancer, and legerdemain (i.e. magician) performer." This is the first notice we have found that Pentland was a clown, though logic would assume he had been at the task for Turner.

Crossing Georgia, which was still Indian



**PENTLAND'S  
DRAMATIC EQUESTRIAN  
ESTABLISHMENT!**  
Additional Attractions! Unparalleled Novelty!



WILL perform at FITCHBURG, on FRIDAY, April 30th  
Doors open at 1 1/2 and 7 o'clock. Performance com-  
mences at 2 and 7 1/2 o'clock, P. M.  
Admission 25 cents—Children under 9 years of age  
half price.  
The above Company will exhibit at Worcester April 27  
and 28th, Clinton April 29th.

This newspaper ad appeared in the *Fitchburg Sentinel* on April 23, 1852. Author's collection.

territory, Pentland played a trick on the little show's plate spinner, Signor Vivalla, which Barnum relates in his autobiography. Dressing as an Indian, Pentland "captured" Vivalla, tied him to a tree, and extracted eleven dollars from him. Later, having changed to his usual clothes, led a "rescue party" to the scene. Vivalla told them a wild story of having been set upon by half a dozen Indians. Pentland then told him the truth, and offered the Signor his money back, but Vivalla, having told his lie, could not accept it.

Barnum disbanded the troupe in Nashville, whereupon Pentland hired some of the people for a company of his own, and bought Barnum's wagons and horses. This enterprise toured until June, 1838, when it, too, closed.

Our man next caught on with "The Bowery Amphitheater," the circus branch of June, Titus & Angevine. He served in an administrative position until December, 1839,

when he was once again listed as clown.

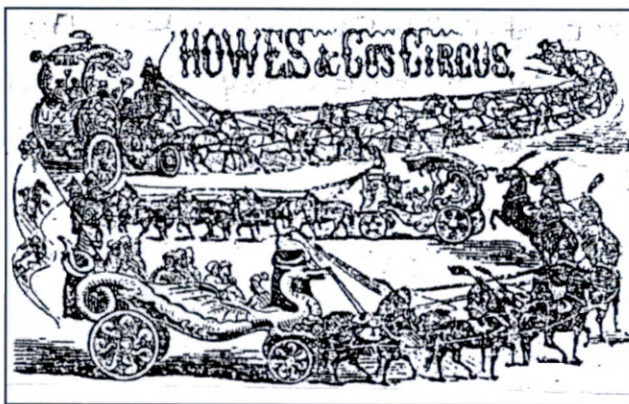
He continued with the Bowery Amphitheater in 1840 and 1841. He was now beginning to be the subject of press notices. The Kingston Ontario *Chronicle* said of him: "Mr. Pentland, the clown, is the most irresistibly droll, comic, eccentric, witty performer living. He is the life and soul of the performance, and keeps the audience, particularly the juvenile portion of it, in a continual roar at his brilliant sallies and good humored countenance.

As with most ante-bellum clowns, we have very little evidence of Pentland's actions in the ring. That clown routines involved riddles, conundrums, jokes, and repartee with the ringmaster is proven, yet

Sands, Lent & Co. 1848 poster featuring Joe Pentland. Harvard College Library, Theatre Collection.



**PENTLAND**  
THE AMERICAN CLOWN. SANDS, LENT & CO'S CIRCUS.  
ENGLISH OPERA HOUSE LONDON. PARK THEATRE NEW YORK & HOWARD ATHENIUM BOSTON.



Joe Pentland's 1852 Golden Dragon chariot as advertised by Howes & Co., which imported it from England in 1848. Author's collection.

the words themselves are seldom reported. Dan Rice's biographer, David Carlyon, has put forth the suggestion that a possible source of clown humor can be found in "Joe Miller's Joke Book," (ca. 1739). Certainly, reviews of the day have many references to "the stale jokes of the clowns," indicating a certain monotony and repetition. There are several accounts of employees of circuses being pushed into clown work because of illness, drunkenness, etc., and being able to do a credible job, simply because they had heard the contents of the acts so many times. Only the clown and the ringmaster had non-dramatic speaking parts in the one-ring circus, yet little or none of the content has come down to us.

The acrobats and rope-walkers and riders rested in the ring between feats, and the clown then entertained until the athletes were ready to resume their presentation. The clown also assisted by, for instance, holding the hoops the riders jumped through, and the garters they leaped over in their acts.

In January, 1841, in Boston, Pentland was



given a benefit, a performance the proceeds of which went to him. Benefits were a matter of contract granted to the more important members of a troupe. On this occasion Pentland appeared seven times in the program. He sang a comic song, juggled, appeared on the slack-rope, and was clown to three of the horse acts.

By 1842 Pentland had reached the point in his career where he was in demand by managers. Richard Sands took a circus to England in that year, and chose Pentland to be its clown. Incidentally, it was this show that introduced the use of the canvas tent into Europe.

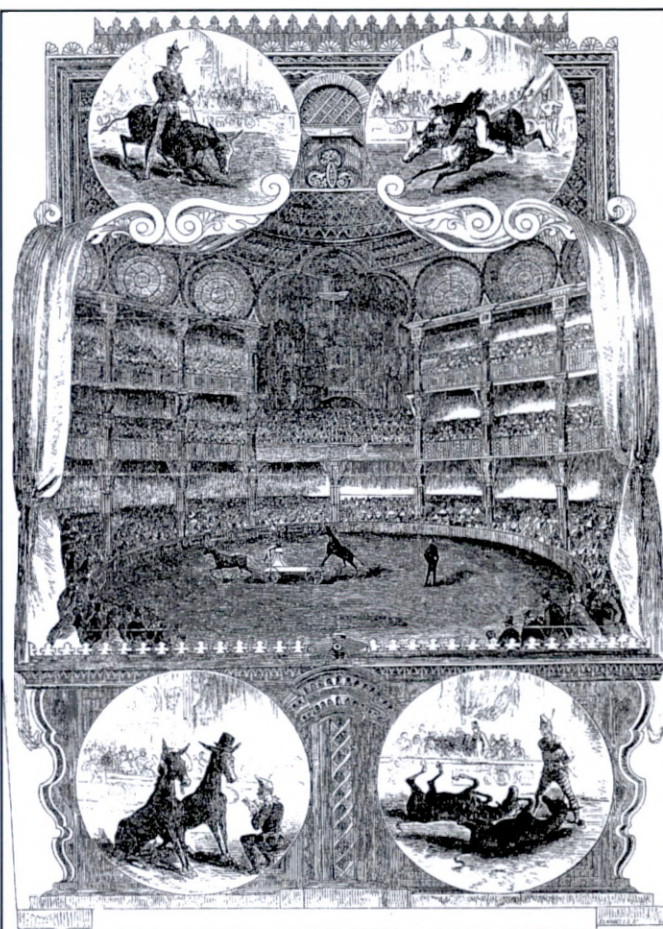
The Van Amburgh menagerie was also in Europe 1838-1844, and for the last two of those years Pentland served as one of their clowns. When he returned to America in 1845, with the Sands company, he caught on with Welch & Mann's Mammoth National Circus, Sands' rival in size among circuses of that time. He stayed but one season with Welch & Mann, and then rejoined Sands & Lent, as the show was titled in America.

From 1846 through 1849 Pentland was the first clown with Sands, Lent & Co., Sam Lathrop assisting him as second clown. The 1848 poster we illustrate here was one mark of Pentland's success. Only the very best performers were honored by having their own paper.

He was advertised as "the greatest American clown" by his employer, Crane & Co. in 1850, but still there is no evidence of his performance. Clown had a universal meaning for the public, and apparently needed no descriptions.

James M. June and Nathan Howes operated the Crane circus in 1851 under the title "James M. June & Co." They had sold the concern to Crane in 1849, and he had sold it back to them after the 1850 season.

Pentland worked for June and Howes in 1851.



Illustrations from *Illustrated London News*, showing Pentland presenting the comic mules at the Alhambra Palace theatre in London in 1858. Author's collection.

In 1852 "the great American clown," received the ultimate honor, a circus in his own name. We do not believe he owned it, but have no proof for our belief that June and Howes financed it, except for the fact that June & Co. ended their 1851 season in Worcester, Massachusetts, which was where Pentland's company began the 1852 season. It was called "Pentland's Dramatic Equestrian Establishment," and had many of the performers from June & Co. of 1851, as well as some of its equipment. It advertised sixty performers, an unlikely number, headlined by Charles and Virginia Sherwood, and William O. Dale, all very competent riders. Frank J. Howes was the agent for the company, lending support to the idea that James June and Nathan Howes were the financial backers.

It was not unusual for a clown to head a circus; Dan Rice was in that position in 1848, but accumulating capital on a clown's salary, \$50 to \$100 a week, was an unlikely proposition. Thus, outside capital was usually necessary.

The circus went west in 1852, after opening in Worcester. They crossed Canada to Detroit, and visited Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio by turns. The last date we have for them in this season is Columbus, Ohio on November 6.

There is a mystery of sorts about Pentland and his performers in 1853. They are nowhere to be found. No newspaper ads or handbills have surfaced. But there is a clue in that James M. June & Co. was on the road in that year, and they began their season in Ohio.

Unfortunately, June's ads did not list his personnel, but these circumstances would seem to indicate that Pentland's 1852 troupe was June's in 1853. Why this should be the case, we don't know.

Pentland's name was back in the title in 1854, and the Sherwoods, among others, were again the chief riding acts. Charles Sherwood, whose real name was Charles Champion, was famous for his "Pete Jenkins" act, to which he gave the name to the flying wardrobe act of many years standing. Cayetano Mariotini presented one in his 1810 circus.

Pentland's 1854 route included the canal route from Albany out to Buffalo, a month in Ontario, and a trip through Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. On 20 November, the troupe began a winter show at the Howard Atheneum in Boston. *Gleason's Pictorial* was impressed enough by Virginia Sherwood's act at the Howard to illustrate it. *Gleason's* saluted Pentland by saying, everyone knows him as "a favorite clown, a fellow of infi-



nite humor, and a man of tact and taste."

We also illustrate Pentland's "Oriental Dragon Chariot," which was imported by Nate Howes in 1848, and which had served as well on Crane's Oriental Circus in 1849 and 1850, and June's Oriental in 1851 and 1853.

For the three seasons beginning in 1854, Pentland's chief acrobatic act was the Nicolo family, headed by an Englishman named John Nichols. Nicolo had three apprentices and two trained dogs. Pentland advertised them as being, "juvenile wonders." The whole Nicolo troupe died together when their ship sank during a cross-Atlantic voyage in 1866.

Pentland's 1855 season again began with a tour of the canal route from Albany to Buffalo, but in this season instead of going into Ontario, he turned south into Pennsylvania. He was in the state until August, when he moved into Maryland and then New Jersey.

Starting from New Jersey in 1856, Pentland no longer had the Sherwoods as the equestrian stars, but substituted Sam Stickney, his daughter Eloise, and Sam, Jr. He also featured the youthful and accomplished Juan Hernandez. By this time, in his fourth (or fifth) year as manager, Pentland's show was a good-sized one. He had 60 draft horses and 16 ring horses, 21 wagons and several carriages and buggies for the personnel. For a circus without a menagerie attached, this array put him among the larger shows.

The 1856 route went into New England and Ontario, ending in Detroit. On 6 January 1857 the circus was offered at auction in Detroit, for reasons unknown to us. It was bought, in advance of auction, by John G. Sloat and James G. Shepard. These worthies operated in 1857 under their own names, Sloat & Shepard's Great Northern Circus, but in 1858 and 1859 used the Joe Pentland Circus title.

Meanwhile, Pentland had gone to England again, with Howes & Cushing's United States Circus. They departed New York in March, 1857, and were abroad for four years. Pentland, however, was with them only until February, 1859, when he

## JOE PENTLAND'S CIRCUS!



WITH an Entire New and Brilliant Equipment  
This Superb Troupe will exhibit at MIDDLE-  
TOWN, on WEDNESDAY, Sept 13th, 1854. Af-  
ternoon and Evening. Doors open at 1½ and 6½ P.  
M. Performance half an hour afterwards. Admis-  
sion 25 cts. This company is distinguished for the  
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**EQUESTRIAN, GYMNASTIC,  
AND PANTOMIMIC,**  
Displaying the highest order of Foreign and domestic  
talent. Among the principal attractions of this  
Troupe are

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**Alphonse, Sebastian and Alma,**  
Together with their two wonderfully trained and  
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from the Gymnase Comique and Olympic, Paris;  
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phitheatre, London; Franconi's Hippodrome, New  
York, &c.

**MR. DAVIS RICHARDS,** the wild eccen-  
trical Horseman, will appear with his untamed Prairie  
Steed, in his Dare Devil Act, without saddle or brid-  
dle, jumping hurdles, leaping fences, &c., &c. This  
is the most daring and wonderful act of horsemanship  
ever witnessed.

**MRS. VIRGINIA SHERWOOD,** the beau-  
tiful Equestrienne, in a variety of elegant Tours de  
Grace, positively unachieved by any other Lady in  
the Profession.

**JOE PENTLAND:** the great American Clown,  
surnamed by the press "The Modern Touchstone,"  
"Chief Priest of Joke," and "The Inimitable Joe!"  
will open his inexhaustible budget of Jokes, Witti-  
cisms, Drolleries and Eccentricities.

Newspaper ad used by Pentland in 1854. Author's collection

returned to America. Howes & Cushing had bought two very well trained mules, Pete and Barney, from Dan Rice. Pentland and clown Jim Myers presented them in the ring. The *Illustrated London News* published a page of drawings of the act, which we illustrate here.

Idle until December, 1859, when he appeared with Dan Rice's show in Philadelphia, Pentland joined James Nixon's circus in January, 1860, with which he remained until September of that year. Nixon went south in September, and Pentland declined to make that trip. He was evidently able to pick and choose his work, indicating a certain fullness of pocket.

He began a six-year stint with Lewis B. Lent in 1861, which placed him with one of the largest, and most successful circuses of the decade of the 1860's. Lent had comic mules

during this period, and Pentland may well have presented them. In 1866 Lent put his show on the railroad, the first time any manager had carried a circus on rails. Because of the loading restrictions, there was no menagerie, and an abbreviated parade, but none of it went overland, as previous railroad attempts had incorporated. Pentland was with it in both 1866 and 1867, and then seems to have retired. We have found no mention of him after the latter year until 1870, when he rejoined the Lent circus. He was there as well in 1871, and then retired for good. Joe Pentland died in New York City on 2 July 1873.

It is clear from the years he was advertised by the larger circuses that he was a headline performer, one of five or six of the leading clowns of his day. It is most unfortunate that we have no method of recapturing what he said in the ring; nor what any clown of the time made of his appearances. We can only cite what reviewers said of him. For Pentland we have this description from the *Kennebec Journal* of Augusta, Maine in 1861: "Each act is interlarded by the side-splitting jokes of Joe Pentland, whose clownishness turns out very decided wisdom, or very approvable patriotism."

We are indebted to Dr. Bruce Lundberg, of New Haven, Connecticut, whose rare Daguerrotype of Joe Pentland inspired the writing of this account.

Joe Pentland, ca. 1870. Circus World Museum collection.





# FAY ALEXANDER

By Steve Gossard

Late in the evening on Sunday, July 16 Rose Alexander sat at her husband's bedside. Husband Fay had been undergoing treatments for cancer for several months, but had recently taken a turn for the worse. No one could know how near the end might be.

"Do you want to come with me?" Fay asked Rose.

"I will be, soon," she said.

"I'll wait for you."

As Rose sat by, the weary vigil began to take its toll, and she began to nod off. "Go ahead and sleep," he said, "I'll be alright."

Try as she might, Rose could not stay awake. When she woke up Fay looked different. He was cold to the touch. He had gone to wait for her.

This was how the end came for Fay Alexander, the great performer, the skillful aerial artist, the sensitive barber. The world at large paid little attention to his passing, but the news was a shock to that elite group of people who called themselves aerialists, because this was Fay Alexander. This was the soft-spoken larger-than-life character who had inspired a generation of performers. This was the man, Fay Alexander, who was motivated always—always to give of his best.

He was born in Seattle in 1924. His father was trained as a barber. Fay was raised in the big city environment of Los Angeles during the depression. When Fay was recovering from an illness which resembled tuberculosis, his parents enrolled him in dancing lessons as a form of physical therapy. This training must have commenced at a very early age, because Billy Barton tells us in *Circus Report* of March 22, 1976 that Alexander was already performing as a "singer of 'snappy songs' and as an 'acrobatic tap dancer'" at the age of three. Few young dance students have ever had the aptitude that Fay had. Few have ever internalized the disciplined attention to detail as he did. Few could ever hope to achieve his exquisite sense of timing and his

organized understanding of his physical presence of space. Alexander developed as an artist before becoming an athlete.

Fay worked for a time with his sister, Dorothy, in an act which they called "The Alexander Twins." He learned how to shoulder responsibility very early. Their act supported the family in those years. When their father was able to open a barber shop of his own the "kid act" split up and Fay was sent to school. In his teens he met Ted DeWayne, who had a risley and teeterboard act which toured the West Coast. Imprinted on a life of show business from his earliest recollection, Fay grew restless. He quit school and joined the DeWayne troupe. The DeWayne act consisted of Ted, Fay and Bill Snyder. They performed for eight years before the three men joined the Coast Guard. Initially the DeWayne act was able to live at home and tour the camp shows. They performed with Stars and Spars along with Victor Mature, with Sid Caesar, and with the Rudy Valee show. When the show closed Fay shipped out to sea on a converted ocean liner with a crew of 950 men. He served in the Pacific for eight months and attained the rank

The DeWayne troupe on Clyde Beatty in 1948. Alexander is on the far left. Pfening Archives.

of Master of Arms. When the war ended Fay was discharged.

For a time after the war the DeWaynes performed their risley act with the Cid Groman show. At this time DeWayne acquired a flying return act rigging, and Fay, Ted and Bill began practicing trapeze. Even without training exceptional talent will win out. With Snyder catching and DeWayne calling the timing from the ground Fay was soon able to catch a double cutaway and a one-and-a-half somersault.

Jerry Wilson had a flying act called the Flying Behrs working fair dates in Texas in 1947. Jerry was the catcher for the act, and he was looking for a new principal flyer. At that time Fay was working as a prop hand. Wilson had heard that Fay was a flyer, and he approached him with a proposition which Fay could not refuse. If Alexander would come to Central America and work with his flying act on Gran Circo Americano, Jerry promised, he would pay all travel expenses plus a hundred dollars a week. In retrospect, Fay recalled to Billy Barton in 1976, "We did a FULL comedy flying act in greasepaint makeup. Then we stripped out of the comedy clothes and with full makeup still on, did a FULL straight flying act! . . . I almost crawled from the tent, my tongue hanging out . . . my hands were like





hamburger." To add insult to injury, the contract was written in Spanish, and it was not in accord with their verbal agreement. Forced to pay his own transportation costs and expenses, Fay could barely make ends meet. He was exhausted and nearly broke. Wilson was persuaded to release him from his contract. He wired his parents for money to come home. As bad as this experience was, it did give him valuable experience with a professional flying act.

In 1948 Fay again joined the DeWayne troupe to work their acrobatic act with the Clyde Beatty Circus whose flying act left in mid-season. Clyde Beatty contracted Ted to provide the flying act with the show for the remainder of the tour. The act consisted of Ted DeWayne, Fay, Donny Johnson, Hank and Christine Monzello, and Bill Snyder working as the catcher.

Fay met a young trick rider named Rose Lamont who was working with Billy Hammond's Wild West Show, an after show feature of the Clyde Beatty Circus that year. Always a man who knew what he wanted, Fay asked Rose to marry him within a month. They were married in Vallejo, California in late May. In time Fay would train Rose to work with the flying act.

When the Beatty show closed in 1949 Fay wrote to Art Concello, General Manager with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, to apply for a job with a flying return act. Concello knew him to be a competent flyer, and he hired him. Fay and Rose packed up everything they owned and moved to Sarasota. In his first experience working with the Big Show, Fay worked in one of the side rings with Jeannie Sleeter, Ski Otaris, and Dick Anderson catching. Willie and Annie Edelston and Carl and Dorothy Durbin worked the

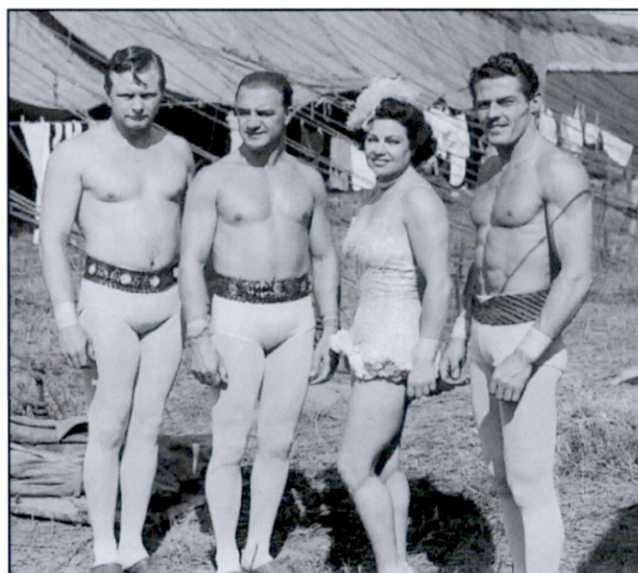


Dick and Alice Anderson, Rose and Fay Alexander. Author's collection.

opposite ring, and Antoinette Concello's troupe worked the center ring position. The following year Anderson left during the shooting of *The Greatest Show on Earth*, and Fay requested Bill Snyder to come on as their catcher.

At this time Fay was performing a two-and-a-half somersault with the

Jimmy Crocker, Willie Kraus, Kay Burslin and Fay Alexander on Ringling-Barnum in 1953. Pfening Archives.



act. When the great film director Cecil B. De Mille asked for someone to double for Cornel Wilde in the movie *Concello* recommended Alexander. This was Fay's first experience doubling before the cameras. It would prove to be a prestigious experience. *The Greatest Show on Earth* won eleven Academy Awards in 1952, including best picture.

Concello was opposed to trapeze performers practicing the triple somersault because he thought, for good reason, that the trick was too dangerous and too hard on the flyer's

shoulders. One trick was not worth risking a man's life or causing a physical disability. For a few weeks in 1950 while Art was away from the show Fay was able to practice catching the fabled triple somersault. During a matinee performance that year, Fay caught his first triple somersault, with Bill Snyder as his catcher. When Concello returned to the show Fay was prohibited from practicing the triple again.

Fay tried it again in 1952 when Jimmy Crocker came into the act as his catcher, and once again Concello insisted that the triple would not be allowed on the show.

Driven by his desire to achieve, Fay and Jimmy caught a perfect triple in performance on opening night at Madison Square Garden that year in spite of Concello's objections. Billy Barton states that on that occasion Fay received a thunderous ovation for this achievement, and Art's wishes were overruled for once by popular demand.

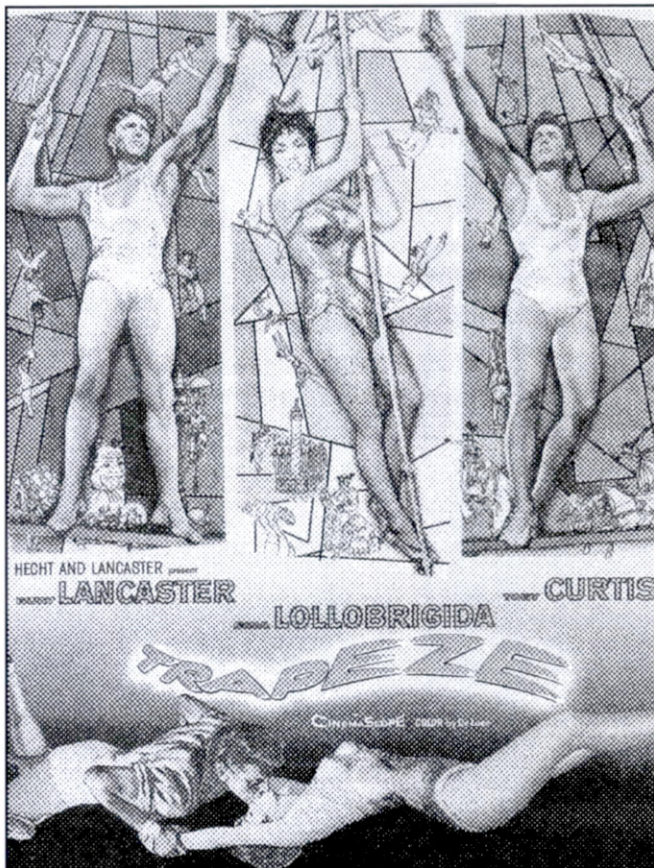
Playing Springfield, Ohio in 1952 Fay took one of the worst falls which any flyer has ever survived. He completed a two-and-a-half somersault to a hand catch



with his catcher, Jimmy Crocker, but as they swung back, they lost their wrist lock. Fay fell from the apex of his swing over the net apron into the tenth row seats, nearly 40 feet. As Rosie tells the story, a very large woman saw him falling, and just managed to sweep one of her children from the stands before Fay crashed into the seats. The fall would likely have been fatal if his head had not fallen into the lap of the woman's other son. Billy Barton described the scene for *Circus Report* in 1976: "He lay there, huddled and small, among chairs and the screams of the audience, and the prop men running, and the band playing frantically."

A few days later Fay returned to work. He flew for twelve weeks in spite of the intense pain, climbing down the rope ladder at the end of each performance because he could not stand to take the net falls. Concello sent Fay to a physician for X-rays where was advised to give up flying for a year or more. He had broken two ribs, fractured a vertebrae in his neck, and severely damaged his shoulder. Concello had been one of the greatest flyers of all time before going into management, and he always took special care of his flyers. Art put Fay into a riding act and let him drop bars with the flying act for the remainder of the season to keep him on the payroll.

Feeling discouraged and apprehensive of his future as a flyer, Alexander again returned to Los Angeles with Rose where he enrolled in barber school. He became proficient at his trade, graduated and worked for a while in his father's shop. Though he did not dislike cutting hair, it could not compare with trapeze performance. He continued with physical therapy in the hope that he would fly again. By 1955 his shoulder was completely healed. He joined the Flying Hartzells as a replacement for Willie Edelman on the King Brothers show. Fay was



Theater card for the movie *Trapeze*.  
Author's collection

with the Hartzells for only six weeks before he reached a turning point in his life.

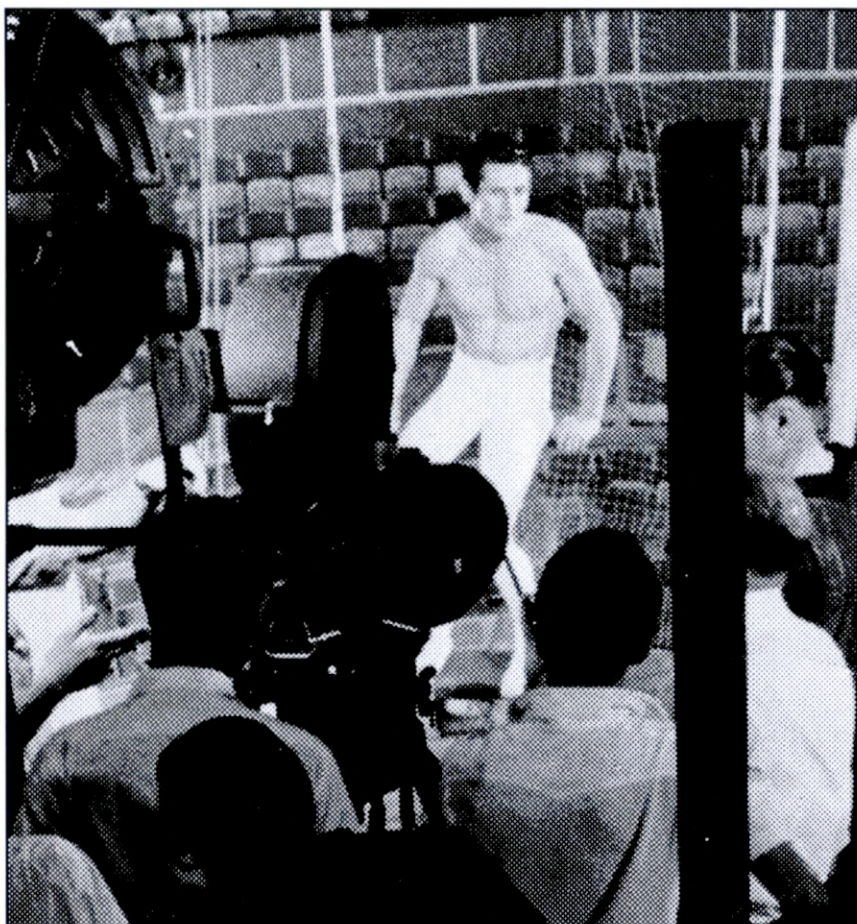
Before becoming an actor, Burt Lancaster had worked in circus and vaudeville in a stationary bar act called Lang and Cravat. After achieving his peerless reputation in the field of motion pictures, Lancaster developed a system whereby he would alternately produce films with wide popular appeal, and films which were very high in artistic and intellectual quality. In 1955 Hecht-Lancaster Productions was casting a dramatic film in which the main characters, performers in a flying-return act, were aspiring to complete a triple somersault. The plot was based on a novel titled *The Killing Frost* by Max Catto, but the entire story was rewritten for the screenplay. The main characters in the book had been dancers, but in the screenplay they were changed to aerialists. This added a dimension of danger and tension which went beyond the scope of the book. The

homosexual conflict in the novel was replaced with a romantic triangle between the female flyer and the two men in the troupe. Gina Lollobrigida played the part of the woman flyer, Lola; Tony Curtis played the male flyer, Tino Orsini; and Lancaster played Mike Ribbel, the catcher. The conflict in the story pivoted on the quest for the completion of the elusive triple somersault, and the tension was focused on this supreme exercise in courage and physical excellence. The film was appropriately called *Trapeze*. It was the quintessential examination of courage and discipline, and the art of trapeze would be the vehicle for this drama. Of course it was essential that the producers find someone who could complete the trick on film. A number of

flyers had become legendary over the years for accomplishing the triple, notably Ernie Clarke, Ernie Lane, Alfredo Codona, Art and Antoinette Concello, Wayne Larey and Clayton Behee. But by 1955 all of these people had either retired from flying, had been injured while performing the triple, or had died trying. There were few flyers who were competent enough to even attempt this feat. Not only did Fay Alexander fit the physical description to perform the stunts for Tony Curtis, but his form was exquisite.

Eddie Ward Jr. had been contracted to double for Lancaster as the catcher for the act. He showed up on the lot of the King Bros. Circus early in the season scouting for a flyer to double for Tony Curtis. Ward must have been aware that Fay had already done stunt work for *The Greatest Show on Earth*. He offered the job to Fay and very soon the Alexanders were flying to Paris. Willie Kraus was also recruited to perform stunts, and Sally Marlowe was to do the stunt work for Gina Lollobrigida.





Alexander in Paris for the filming of *Trapeze*. Author's collection.

Alexander had not practiced the triple somersault for some time, and practice on the set at Cirque D'Hiver was intense. As the production evolved Fay took on more and more of the stunt work. The opening scene of the movie required a flyer to take a fall into the net and a bounce off of the ridge rope onto the floor. One of the top professional stunt men from Hollywood had refused to do it. Willie Kraus attempted the stunt twice, and was injured. Reluctantly, Lancaster agreed to let Alexander attempt the stunt, knowing that if Fay were injured their only hope of filming the triple would be lost. To everyone's relief, he completed the trick perfectly in one take.

Fay also doubled for Gina Lolabrigida in the web and single trapeze sequences because Sally Marlowe did not know enough about aerial work. He donned a wig and falsies to do the act. Gina was so offended to have a male stunt man

doubling for her that she refused to appear on the set. Wire service releases from Paris reported that Gina refused to pose in still photos because Fay "made her look too much like Gary Cooper." Although there was no mistaking Fay's broad shoulders if one looked closely at the

action in the film, the effect was remarkably convincing. Willie Kraus played Gina's part in the flying act, dropping the bar when Fay returned to the pedestal board. Fay, Eddie and Willie practiced on the rigging in the evenings after the day's shooting had ended while Rosie and Jeannie Kraus watched. The Paris rats infested the building at night, however, and it wasn't long before the girls were driven from the grandstands.

When the cast learned that Alexander had been trained as a barber he was requested to do double duty and cut hair as well. He became the official barber on the set for Lancaster, Curtis and some of the production staff. In one scene from the movie the catcher, Mike, was trying to justify teaching Tino the dangerous triple somersault: "What do you want him to do, giant swings on a single bar? That's all right for music halls and street fairs," said Lancaster, and he followed with the ad-lib, "I'd rather see him cutting hair in a barber shop!"

Alexander and Lancaster developed a close personal friendship during the six months of filming. Burt had worked with the circus in his days as a bar artist with Nick Cravat, and had been married to June Ernest, one of the top

Alexander, on right, making a catch. Author's collection.





professional women bar artists, for one year in 1935. As Dorothy Grotefent pointed out in her column for the *Long Boat Observer* of March 10, 1994 the Hollywood cast was a friendly group, but they did not share the same rare sense of "family" that the circus people did. In Paris the Lancasters and the Alexanders shared dinner every evening.

Fay was listed in the credits as "Technical Advisor, Flying Sequences," and he must have contributed much to the dialogue in the practice scenes throughout the movie. Having departed so drastically from the main plot of the novel, the screenplay had the freedom to rewrite the story. This made it possible, if not necessary, to improvise dialogue which was of a strictly technical nature. For example, as Mike instructed Tino in the art of flying: "Don't put your head down coming down the hill. . . . No, no, you're kipping too late," and "Now remember, don't fight that bar. Your natural break will give you all the height you need." At the conclusion of the movie, as Mike is leaving the act, he tells Tino's new catcher, "Keep him

Bob and Dorothy Yerkes with Rose and Fay Alexander. Author's collection.



breaking full and strong.

Make him drive that break. Now that he's got it, don't let him lose it." From the excitement of achievement to the sacrifice of friendship, these bits of technical instruction punctuated the emotional aspect of the story in subtle ways without descending to sentimentality. They helped to give the dialogue an element of verisimilitude which set *Trapeze* far and away above any other circus film. Their inclusion in the story line re-enforced the strong feeling of respect which Lancaster had for the profession in general, and the respect which he felt for Alexander in particular as a top professional in this unique field.



Paul McCausland, Rose Alexander, Fay Alexander and Ted Stewart. Author's collection.

In the story, the circus manager has the net taken down while the act is in progress because he does not want Mike and Tino to complete the triple. John Ringling North is in the audience, and everyone feels certain that he will offer them a contract if he sees them perform the trick. Mike and Tino recklessly attempt the trick without the net. As

described by Billy Barton, the actual completion of the triple on the film set was nearly as exciting as the scene in the movie. It was said that the studio was losing between \$25,000 and \$30,000 for each day's shooting, and the film was already several months behind schedule. The production was over budget by more than a million and a half. Cirque Bouglione was scheduled to move into the building. Barton described the scene on the set: "The morning of the shooting they moved the extras into the audience. The building was packed.

"That made it hotter," says Fay. "And it was warm outside which didn't help."

"They began to film. Fay missed the first triple. They wiped him off, fixed his make-up.

"He went up again. He missed the second.

"Now the crew was getting nervous.

"I missed seven triples in a row," Fay says.

"Shall we call it a day, Fay?" asked Burt, Sir Carol Reed (the director)



behind him.

"No. . . let me try one more."

"Fay climbed the pedestal board.

"Action!" called Reed.

"Rosie crossed her fingers, sitting as part of the 'audience.'

"Willie Kraus (as Gina) dropped the rise. Fay (as Tony) swung out and, on the eighth try, Eddie Ward (as Burt) caught the perfect triple somersault.

"Cut and print!" shouted Sir Carol Reed.

"And those Europeans, who hadn't seen a triple since the late Alfredo Codona, rose in their seats and gave me a standing ovation that lasted a FULL FIFTEEN MINUTES!

"Fay, with tears streaming down his cheeks, stood helplessly on the pedestal board while the applause grew and grew until it sounded like hundreds of wild stallions running on the old roof of the Cirque D'Hiver.

"When Fay reached the ground Burt came up and shook his hand. 'I just want you to know,' he said, 'that whatever success comes of this picture, we owe it all to you.'"

In an article from Fay's collection titled "Great 'Trapeze Somersault'" Ann Masters quoted Burt Lancaster as saying: "Fay had done the triple only six times in his life--and we had to take the chance that he could do it at least once more for us.

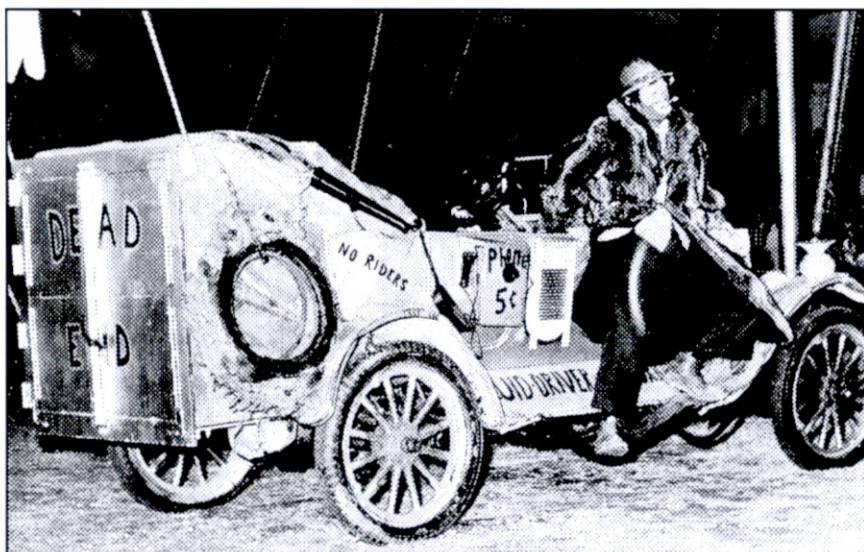
"Two months before the picture started shooting, he practiced every night.

"On the day that the big scene was scheduled to be shot, everyone in the company was keyed up to a high pitch of excitement. Again and again Alexander tried the triple. And again and again he failed. . . .

"Finally we begged him to stop trying, but he kept saying, 'Let me try once more.'

"I'll never forget that last try. He did it—it was perfect—and everyone on the set let out a screaming cheer. They yelled and squealed and beat each other in a frenzy of joy and excitement that lasted five minutes. Alexander, meanwhile, just stood up there on the platform, blushing crimson." Fay had come a long way from the self-taught flyer with the DeWayne troupe after the war.

*Trapeze* can now be considered a classic production. Its examination



Al's Lemonzine, Alexander's funny car presentation. Author's collection.

of the refinements of the art of flying was extraordinary. Its insights into the emotions of the flyers were a revelation. The ingenious way that it wove a faithful picture of these artists' lives into the plot places it in a special class of its own. What is more, this film inspired a generation of talented performers to dedicate their lives to the art of trapeze. Fay Alexander was an indispensable part of this film, and he certainly considered it one of the great accomplishments of his life. To the elite world of circus performers Fay had become the personification of the word "trapeze."

When Fay completed work with the film he formed his own act, which he called the Flying Alexanders. When his catcher didn't show up for work with the flying act on the Gil Gray show in 1956, he broke Bob Yerkes in as his catcher. Bob had worked with Fay in 1947 and 1948 in the DeWaynes teeterboard and risley act. Yerkes worked with the Alexanders for the next six years, including two years on the Ringling Barnum show in 1957 and 1958. The Alexanders worked indoor dates with Polack Bros. from 1957 to 1961. In 1958 Fay doubled for Gilbert Roland, and Bob doubled for David Nelson in *The Big Circus*. Yerkes went on to train many more flyers. He taught nine performers to catch the triple somersault, and two to catch the three-and-a-half.

In 1961 Fay recruited a young lady named Candy Cavaretta from the St. Petersburg, Florida Community Circus. The next year Candy's family came to visit her with the show. When the family went home Candy's younger sister, Terri, stayed with the Alexanders flying act. Fay trained the youngster, and at eight or nine years of age, Terri was one of the youngest flyers ever to work in a flying return act. In time she would prove herself to be the greatest woman flyer who ever lived, with an incredible career record of triple somersaults to her credit.

Over the years Alexander doubled for other movies. He doubled for Martha Ray and Doris Day in *Jumbo*. In *The Big Circus* he doubled for Gilbert Roland. He doubled for Henry Fonda in a made-for-television movie, *The Emmett Kelly Story*, a production which Rose states was never released. Rose and Bob Yerkes' wife, Dorothy, also doubled for Bing Crosby's wife in *The Big Circus*. Rose was also doing stunt work for *The Emmett Kelly Story* when she was injured, and Donny Johnson came in and took her place.

As time went by the Flying Alexanders worked with a number of circuses. Besides major shrine dates they worked off and on with the Gil Gray Circus, the Clyde Beatty show, the New York World's Fair in 1964, the Ringling-Barnum Circus for opening dates at Madison Square Garden, and with various parks and fairs. Fay taught aerial acts for the



television production, *Circus of the Stars*, in the late 1980s. Fay received the George E. Cohan Award in Hollywood for two consecutive years in 1970 and 1971. This was an award for professional excellence in a specialized field.

Ed Sullivan presented him with the award in 1970, and Emmett Kelly made the presentation in 1971. Looking forward to the day when he would have to retire from flying, Fay bought Ernie Wiswell's "funny car" in 1967.

He renamed it "Al's Lemonzine" and from that time on he booked the funny car along with his flying act for every performance. In 1974 Fay dislocated his shoulder while working with the flying act. The same year he tore the bicep muscle in his right arm. Although he still filled in occasionally when an act needed a flyer, or even a catcher, for all practical purposes Fay was retired from flying from that time on. He worked his funny car routine with Shrine dates for another twenty years.

I was lucky enough to know Fay Alexander for the past ten years. My impression was that he was a very unassuming person, but justly proud of his accomplishments. His door was always open to his fans. He was always approachable. He had a meticulous attention for detail that came from years of working in one of the most dangerous professions. I had great respect for Fay as a person and as an artist, but what is more important are the opinions of his peers.

When he descended from the flyer, Fay was calm, deliberate, low-keyed. More than one observer commented, "Rose does all the talking for both of them," which was a slight exaggeration. Truly, their personalities complemented one another. Rose states that Fay used to laugh at her because she would get so upset when he was driving that she had to put her face over the air-conditioning vent to cool off.

He had a great sense of humor. Terri Cavaretta recalls that when she and Candy ate dinner with the Alexanders, Fay would sometimes watch her eating and point at something on her plate. "Are you going to



Fay Alexander in 1994. Author's collection.

eat that?" he would say. Tony Steele recalls Fay sitting at the dinner table pretending to pick his teeth with a piece of spring steel. He would flick bebes at the people at the other tables, then look away nonchalantly picking his teeth when they looked up. For a number of years he continued to work his funny car routine for the sheer enjoyment of it. Once a few years ago Fay and Rose had passed through town to visit Dorothy Durbin in Bloomington, Illinois on their way to play a Shrine date in Iowa. I asked Dorothy where they were going next.

"To Iowa," she said.

"No, I mean after that."

"Then they go home."

"Home?" I asked, "Aren't they going on the road? Aren't they playing any more dates?"

"Nope," she said, "just the one."

"You mean they drive all the way up here just to play one date?"

"Yep," Dorothy said, "don't ask me why. That's just the way they do it."

Alexander was also sentimental. He once told me that he and Rose doted on the Cavaretta girls when they were with the act. "You know," he said, "Rose and I, we never had any kids, and they were so cute and all." In recent years he didn't

feel that he could travel too far from home. He had to stay home and take care of his dogs. They depended on him.

Fay was admired and respected by everyone as the consummate artist who made a profound impression on the profession. A number of flyers have told me that watching the movie *Trapeze* was the greatest inspiration which shaped their professional lives. As Jim Cavaretta said, "To me he was the star. He was the greatest." In Tony Steele's words, "There is no sense talking about trapeze without talking about Fay Alexander. He was my personal inspiration when the movie, *Trapeze*, came out. . . . He was everybody's idol. The most respected flyer in the world." What is more, Fay was a great and generous teacher. "He shared his knowledge and never held anything back." Tito Gaona states that when he was a young trampoline artist *Trapeze* was an inspiration to him. He felt that fate was leading him into trapeze work because the main character's name was Tino, which was very close to his own name. Tito's sister, Chela described Fay perfectly, "He was a great man, a great flyer and a great friend."

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# FRANK A. ROBBINS

## a most successful failure

PART THREE  
By Robert Sabia

1887  
Stardust

Looking back over his six years as a circus owner, Robbins had to favorably reflect on his significant accomplishments. Not only did he achieve great success in placing his show among the leaders in the entertainment business, but his name was recognized by the public as synonymous with quality presentations, and by his peers as a quality individual as well. At this stage of his life, there is no evidence that he dwelled too long on what he had accomplished, but focused rather on what he was going to accomplish. There was at least one burning objective that remained and with good fortune and perseverance, this goal was now almost within reach.

Closing out 1886, Robbins placed an ad in the December 11th *Clipper* seeking a sideshow front man, a first class aerial act, and a sober and reliable boss hostler (did this mean that John Griffin was not?). He was selling an elegantly carved light bandwagon (15 man capacity), a tableau wagon, both capable of being drawn overland by 4 horse teams, and 4 light horse cage wagons. All the wagons were alleged to have been recently overhauled and wonderfully painted. Also being offered was a 100 foot round top. The entire lot was being sold at less than half of its actual value, a measly \$1,500. He was using his show's address in New York, 201 Centre Street, which in fact was the *Show Printers'* offices.

In early February, Robbins advertised in the *Clipper* for canvasmen, teamsters, animal men, and train men. He apparently satisfactorily completed his search for a new boss hostler who was Edward

Goldsborough of Ridge Avenue in Philadelphia. Repeating in their prior positions were Lucius Foster of Frenchtown, New Jersey, boss canvasman (James Whalen was in charge of the menagerie canvas under Foster); John Craig of Frenchtown, chief of menagerie; and Charles Shields of St. Louis, train master. Their physical locations are set forth because persons seeking employment were to write directly to the individual bosses and not to the show's winter quarters in Frenchtown. This may have been the normal procedure at the time and is

included only to demonstrate that the boss was just that, and was fully responsible for all activities within his purview, including the all important hiring and firing.

Joining these staffers, a first class crew of associate executives and key players was again hired. The following individuals were repeaters, often for several years. William Loper was to be Robbins' alter ego; George Cole, press agent and all around front

Program with local advertising used by Robbins in Chelsea, Massachusetts on June 11, 1887. Pfening Archives.

# FRANK A. ROBBINS

## NEWS SHOWS

### DAILY PROGRAMME.

CHELSEA, MASS., JUNE 11, 1887.

## PEOPLE'S CLOTHING STORE.

230 BROADWAY.

GREAT STOCK OF

Men's, Youth's, Boys' and Child

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### PROGRAMME.

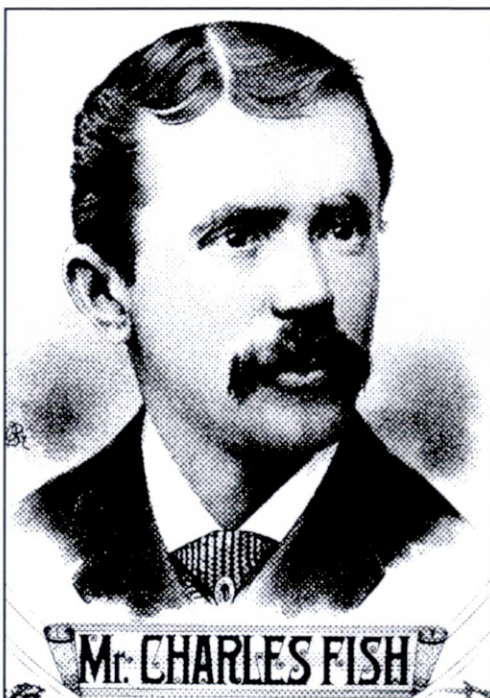
RING No. 1.	STAGE.	RING No. 2.
1. OVERTURE, <i>Regatta</i> , ..... VERDI		
2. INAUGURAL. — Simultaneous CLASSIC PROCESSION AND ORIENTAL PAGEANT around the great exterior Hippodromatic Circle, and in all the Rings, of superbly caparisoned monster Elephants, giant Camels and Dromedaries, lions and red Wild Beasts, Mythologic Spectacles, Allegory of all Continents, Regally Magnificent Congress of the Nations, Squads of noble Mounted Horsemen, Cavalries of Knightly Armed Knights and Courtly Dames, Barbaric Pomp, splendid and Novel Costumes, Banquets, Trappings, and Rare Devices.		
3. ALMA DANJANATA, the heroic and beautiful Hindoo Snake Charmer, literally arrayed and wreathed in the terrible and crushing coils of Monster East India Pythons, and emboldened in gliding Zores, Ashites, Brucaria, Vokkies, Tarsus and Festoons of huge, erect Serpents of brilliant hues.		



man; O. J. Boyd, general agent; Henry Mann, contacting agent; Frank Gayler, press agent; Henry Sylvester, manager ad car #2 (later replaced by new man H. J. Ellis); Andrew Gaffney, superintendent of the parade; John Burke, outside tickets manager; Charles Fish, equestrian director; John Fulton, sideshow manager; and Harry Leoni, steward. New faces included Clarence E. Allen, treasurer; Gus Bernard, manager advance car #1; G. F. Waters, manager stereopticon brigade; James J. Burns, musical director; Mme. Genevieve Lamar, calliope player (later replaced by John Keenan); William Thompson, elephants; and S. H. Jimmerson, manager of the candy stands.

In addition to repeat performers Charles Fish (1885), the Jeal Sisters, and Ira Paine, was the octogenarian, it seems, Andrew Gaffney, and his cannonballs (he must have been using balloons at this stage of his life); Alna Danjanata, the beautiful snake charmer who enthralled more than a few reporters the previous year; John and Connie Rixford, acrobats; William Smead, horizontal bars; Andrew Watrigant, single trapeze and high wire; Charles Pettit, clown; William Carroll, clown and presenter of the clown elephant, Abdelena (is this Jack of 1886?); Harry De Forest, boy juggler; and James White, ringmaster. Blending the new with the old, joining the performer's rank were William and Lucy Davene, aerialists; Charles Watson, hurtle rider and teetering ponies; Frank Ashton, hand balancing; Jasie Ashton, cloud swing; Charles Phillips, four horse rider; Rosina Dubsky, tight rope walker; Albert Wilber, Arabian trick horse "Frank"; and William Thompson, trainer of the elephant band (8). James Burns had 14 members in the human band.

In the sideshow, John Fulton had an impressive array of curiosities including Madam Turpin, long haired lady (repeater); Clara Baldwin, an armless midget amanu-



Charles Fish, featured rider on the Robbins show. Cincinnati Art Museum collection.

ensis; Zip, What is It? (repeater); Ashbury Ben, the spotted boy (repeater); E. N. Reynolds, performing birds; Etta Reynolds, Madagascar Lady; Julia Woodward, circassian; Minnie Woodward, fat girl; Alex Wilson, ventriloquist (repeater); Nellie and William Thompson, glass blowers; and William Thompson, performing bear. Later in the season Zulu Zingara, was added as a snake charmer and George Blake took over the performing bear from the very busy William Thompson. Professor William Jacobs and his 10 piece band were back as well. In the concert, George Cole was vocalist for life; Mattie Bliss, returning; also Pettit and White's song and dance routines; and William Milligan's Irish and Dutch specialties. The concert featured Mlle. Loto's slide for life. Musically, it was supported by the 10 Jubilee Singers (repeaters). Brother Oran Robbins sold tickets.

In the March 15th *Clipper*, it was averred that Robbins had added a fully equipped car shop to his winter quarters in Frenchtown. He employed about 60 people rebuild-

ing, building, and repairing the physical equipment, and preparing wardrobe in anticipation for the quickly arriving season. Opening day was to be at Frenchtown on April 20th.

In the nearby *Clinton Democrat*, under the Frenchtown news, it was stated that the "F. A. Robbins' circus leaves this week, and with it will disappear many whose faces have become familiar with us the past Winter. We have found them gentlemen in every respect during their stay with us." As further evidence of compatibility, the residents of Frenchtown turned out in good numbers to see the opening day performances in fine weather. This experience was replicated the next day in Lambertville. The show's title for 1887 was identical to that used the previous year: Frank A. Robbins' New Shows! Museum, Two Ring Circus, and Monster Menagerie! The *Lambertville Record* indicated that it took two or three trains of the usual size to bring the show in. "The street parade was unusually large and fine, and equaled in many respects that of the more pretentious 'greatest shows on earth' . . . the menagerie exhibited a choice and large collection of rare animals, a view of which well repaid one for a visit. . . . The circus tent contained two rings and an elevated stage. The principal objection to this is that when the performances are going on in all three, one gets too much for his money. . . . [A]mong the best features being the wonderful riding of Jas. (sic) W. Fish the champion of the world. Neither Barnum nor Forepaugh has a rider that is his equal. . . . Mr. Ira Paine, the champion shot, showed wonderful skill; the feats of tight rope walking, the gymnastic performances, etc., were excellent, and in fact, the whole entertainment was attractive and pleasing. The clowns showed that it was not necessary to be vulgar in order to be funny."

At Bordentown on April 22, a scribe indicated that it took 23 cars



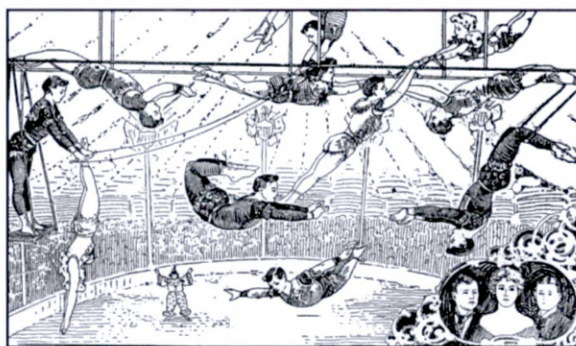
to move the show. It was not clear if this total included the 2 advance cars. He went on to say that it cost \$300 transport it the 20 or so miles from Bordentown to Burlington, New Jersey. At the latter location, the inclement weather was said to be about as bad as it was two years earlier when the show played there in October. Nevertheless, to the extent permitted by the rain, business was relatively good. The paper particularly enjoyed the clown elephant, Paine's shooting, Mrs. Paine's bravado in standing up to be shot at, with ease and dignity, and Fish's and the Jeal Sisters riding acts. Traveling only seven miles to its Monday date at Mount Holly meant an early Sunday arrival and setup. Lots of

locals were about. A hyena got out of its cage, but was quickly recaptured without much trouble. April weather, however, held down attendance to the disappointment of many. Robbins told the newspaper that the railroads had recently raised their fees by 50%. What he didn't say was that in the early season, this rate increase didn't affect his show at all for he had wisely signed contracts with the railroads in the latter part of 1886; a strong revelation that he was always looking ahead and knew where he was going well in advance of getting there.

At Freehold, New Jersey on April 27, a new ad, reflective of the array of featured acts, made its debut. The title of the show was slightly modified to Frank A. Robbins' New Monster Shows! Comprising a Double Circus! A Monster Menagerie! And an Immense Museum of Wonders! The acts of Charles Fish, Chevalier Ira Paine, the Jeal Sisters, William and Lucy Davene, Mlle. Alna Danajanta, and the \$125,000 elephant band were featured in the ad. When weather was good, business was good as the show worked its way through central New Jersey. Reviews were universally very positive. En route to Long

Branch, a flat car derailed, seriously damaging Ira Paine's dog cart. The trains were so heavily loaded that the railroad had to send two additional locomotives to power them to their next stand.

The next week commenced at Keyport, New Jersey on May 2 to excellent business and which continued until foul weather caught up to



the show at Hackettstown on the 7th. The jumps were short. All stands were in New Jersey except for Stroudsburg, just across the Delaware in Pennsylvania on May 6. There *The Jeffersonian* provided some additional insight to the goings on. "The street pageant was more than what was expected as it extended . . . a distance of nearly a half a mile. . . . Two excellent bands of music, a large number of animals cages, some of them open which afforded a sight of the animals, nine elephants and two sacred Egyptian Buffalo bulls—one white and one black. The horses were principally of the Norman stock which helped to make the display more attractive." It went on to discuss the menagerie and sideshow in general in complimentary terms. The performance was equally well received and the management was cited as being of the highest class. At Hackettstown, in rainy weather before a light audience, Elena Jeal was seriously hurt during her four horse bareback riding act. She was riding two of the horses when they separated and went on either side of a pole, throwing Ms. Jeal against it with great force. When she arose with the help of others, it was obvious that she sus-

tained an ugly wound to her forehead. Blood continued to stream down her face as she exited the arena.

The next week, the weather generally held and business was between good and very big. In the fairly large cities of Passaic, New Jersey on May 10, Orange, New Jersey on May 11 and Yonkers, New York on May 12, municipalities which had seen most of the big shows over the years, claimed that Robbins' was either the best ever or certainly equal to the best. When we consider that these areas were prime territory for Barnum and Forepaugh, this was strong praise indeed. The show was not unexpectedly slow in crossing the Hudson by the rail ferry at Hoboken. It then traversed

Manhattan the long way up the east shore of Hudson, crossed the Harlem River bridge, and proceeded into Yonkers. The parade was around 2:30 p. m. and the afternoon show was held about an hour later to a packed house. Robbins' family, including daughter Reine, and his sister Maggie visited at Peekskill, New York on Saturday, May 14 in excellent weather. They remained on the show until May 17th at Mount Vernon when they departed to their home in Brooklyn. Weather and business was good or better at all the stands that week, culminating with super business at Derby, Connecticut on May 21st. While there, negotiations were concluded with the Cameron Zoological Institute of New Haven for several animals including an excellent lioness. They were added to the menagerie at New Britain on May 24.

At Port Chester on May 18, over 1,000 remained for the concert after the night performance which must have pleased George S. Cole greatly. The show continued in Connecticut for the first three days into the next week and then entered into Massachusetts at Westborough on the 26th. It gradually worked into the Boston area, playing a number of



towns on the south side of the Hub, concluding at Stoughton on June 3. When weather permitted, business was good at all stands. Martingales were placed on the elephant Gold Dust at Franklin on Memorial Day to inhibit his aggressive actions toward his keepers. George Hill visited the show at Attleboro on May 31, thereby maintaining his familiarity with its workings and his close relationship with Robbins. His frequent visits become important later on.

The show was routed west within Massachusetts reaching Clinton on June 4, just north of Worcester, and enjoyed excellent business. The same was experienced on Monday at Hudson after a Sunday jump of only a few miles. Then it was back to the Boston area; this time on the north side. Jumps were very short, as small as five miles at Chelsea on the 11th. Business was very good throughout and the show gave great satisfaction at all stands. It is worthy to note the most prestigious paper in Boston, the *Sunday Herald*, provided the following review of a circus that didn't even play Boston proper: "Frank A. Robbins' Circus which is showing on the New England circuit, is one of the best that has exhibited in the smaller cities for many years. It is completely equipped, and there is not a poor act in the long ring programme given. The riders are graceful and skillful, the specialty performers are among the best in their line in the country, and the menagerie is unusually large and contains a great variety of interesting and rare animals. Two rings and an elevated platform are used under the huge tent, and the seats provided are remarkably comfortable and well placed, so that all may see and enjoy every feature in the show. A herd of trained elephants is one of the great features of the performance. The company is well organized and well disciplined, and the show and well worthy of the great patronage it has been receiving."

Unfortunately this wonderful review came at the last day of its greater Boston tour. The company was heading north; initially into New Hampshire and continuing in the northerly direction through Maine to its ultimate destination, Canada, for a stay of almost two and a half months. Robbins celebrated his 31st birthday at Pittsfield, New Hampshire on June 15. He also had reason to celebrate because of the continuing good business for the five New Hampshire dates. The show had a rail wreck en route to Epping on the 16th, when a flat car derailed and overturned. Remarkably, only the flat was seriously damaged. Despite a late arrival at Epping, the show was up and ready at its scheduled opening.

Sunday run of 150 miles. Rain and cold weather followed the show for the next four days. It had its expected affect on business. With clearing weather at Waterville on the 24th, the locals showed up in goodly numbers, with a solid day also at Bangor on the 25th. The *Bangor Commercial* expressed great pleasure with the performance. It characterized the street parade as "magnificent." A relatively short Sunday run of 50 miles took the show into the interior of the state at Dover on the 27th. Excellent business was found there, as it was the next day at Old Town. Reversing direction, the troupe then headed northeast to visit the very small towns of Mattewamkeag (no matter how one pronounces it, it is probably wrong) and Vanceboro. It was very hot at both locations but not as a result of warm bodies.

The show reached the Canadian border and within a few miles of the Atlantic Ocean at Calais, July 1 where good business and fine reviews were received. It was even better the next day at Houlton, 90 miles north, also on the Canadian border. The last day in the United States for a while was, appropriately, on July 4th, at Caribou. To suggest that the business was great in the afternoon would be an understatement. The sideshow and concert also shared in the bounty. As the concert was letting out, the skies blackened and cyclone passed within two miles of the grounds. It was followed by a flood of rain of biblical proportions. The big top held but there was over six inches of water on the lot. As a result, no evening show was possible.

Crossing into New Brunswick, the opening date was Grand Falls on July 5. Heavy rain caused the single performance to be lightly attended. Heading south along the Canadian side of the border, small attendance was accompanied by rain which continued for the next two days. The rains ceased at

WINDSOR, TUESDAY, AUGUST 30th. 1887

**FRANK A. ROBBINS'**  
**Double Circus, Museum, Menagerie**  
 AND  
**TRAINED ANIMAL PARADOX,**  
 WILL EXHIBIT AT  
 WINDSOR, Tuesday, August 30th.



**CHEVALIER**  
**IRA**  
**PAINE**  
**MASTERSHOT**  
**OF THE**  
**WORLD**

WHAT YOU WILL SEE IN THIS  
**Great, New and Novel Show!**  
 TWO CIRCUS COMPANIES IN TWO RINGS!  
 DOUBLE ELEVATED STAGE PERFORMANCE!  
 MENAGERIE OF RARE ANIMALS!  
 MONSTER MENAGERIE OF RARE ANIMALS!  
**CHEV. IRA PAINE**  
 The Master Shot of the World, in his marvelous exhibition with RIFLE, SHOTGUN and FISHING  
 Possesses the only opportunity of witnessing this PHENOMENALLY UNERRING MARKSMAN,  
 as he returns to Europe this fall, having accepted the position of INSTRUCTOR TO  
 THE SUPREME GUARD OF RUSSIA.

**CHARLES W. FISH, the One King Horseman of the Universe.**  
 A Herd of Monster EDUCATED ELEPHANTS, including the  
**\$125,000 ELEPHANT BAND!**  
 Performing on a variety of Musical Instruments AND DANCING THE FULL  
 FIGURES OF THE LANCERS.

**LINDA JEAN.** The only Lady Bounding Jockey Rider.  
**WILLIAM—THE DAVENES—LUCKY!** The Oriental Snake Charmer, wrapped in coils of  
 Monster Rattlesnakes.

**ELLENA JEAN.** Champion Lady Bareback Rider.  
**Mlle. ALNA DANAJANATA.** Wonderful Aerial Artist and Champion  
 Gymnast.

**THE ONLY CLOWN ELEPHANT "ABDOLINA."** TEN FUNNY CLOWNS and  
 A HUNDRED STAR PERFORMERS from every branch of the Artistic Profession, forming one  
 of the grandest and greatest Exhibitions on earth. A FIRM VOUCHER OF THE GREAT  
 Entertainment will be given at 10 o'clock a.m., starting from the place of Exhibition. Two per-  
 formances daily. Shows open at 1 and 8 p.m. Will also exhibit at INDIANVILLE, Monday, Aug.  
 29. BOSTON, Wednesday, Aug. 31. RICHMOND, Thursday, Sept. 1.

Robbins newspaper ad used in 1887. Author's collection.

Maine started off with a bang with a great day at the coastal town of Rockland on the 20th, after a long



Fredericton, on the 8th, and business improved accordingly. The company closed out the week on the plus side at St. Johns. Generally good weather prevailed on its easterly trek as the show then dipped into Nova Scotia for an important two day stand at Halifax on July 14 and 15. The coffers were amply filled for the show's efforts. The *Evening Mail* complemented all of the usual suspects in a first-class review. This paper, amongst many others, marveled at the intrepidity of Mrs. Paine who held many of the targets of her husband, sharpshooter, Ira Paine. (How would one explain a miss—oops?)

Meanwhile, boss hostler Edward Goldsborough placed an ad in the *Clipper of July 23* seeking four and six horse drivers. The Inter-colonial Railroad provided the troupe with superb service in this area of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, moving the trains at times around 60 miles an hour. Good business continued as the New Brunswick tour was completed. Quebec, starting with Rimouski on the St. Lawrence River on the 21st proved to be spotty with good days intermixed with lighter ones. Playing Pointe Levis on the 23rd, across the St. Lawrence from Quebec City, a teamster driving a heavy tableau wagon lost control and the entire ensemble careened out of control on a steep hill. The wagon killed a draft horse belonging to the show and another locally owned horse. The wagon crashed into a house, damaging it. The teamster was severely injured, suffering a concussion of the brain. He was hospitalized in poor condition. The parade and afternoon performance were canceled and the night business was light. The next week opened at Sherbrooke on the 25th to good business and continued in the same vein through the Saturday date at St. Hyancithe on the 30th. At the latter town, a coach was derailed and fell against a freight car. Although the show car sustained significant damage, none

of the occupants were injured. (I suspect that they would have preferred a more modest wake up call.) A two day stand at Montreal followed on the first two days of August. Fine business and high press marks resulted. The side show did landmark business. The show crossed the St. Lawrence River on the brand new Lachine Bridge, being one of the first paying trains to do so.

After one more date in Quebec at Lachute, Robbins entered Ontario at Ottawa, the capital of Canada, on the 4th, and played out the week to good business in hot weather including Prescott on the 6th which was on the St. Lawrence and across the river from Ogdensburg, New York. The company then took a leap of 135



miles to the northwest, for a Monday stand at Pembroke on the Ottawa River. Big business was had. It was bad timing because crop harvesting held business down at Renfrew and Almonte, but Perth on the 11th was on the plus side in a big way. It was in Perth that O. J. Boyd advised Robbins that he had purchased at Albany the "\$10,000" steam calliope formerly belonging to J. H. Rice's Circus. Business held at a steady level for the next 6 dates through Alliston on August 19, which is 30 miles north of Toronto. After light business at Brampton, a suburb of Toronto, Robbins took a Sunday jump of around 100 miles to Owen Sound on the 22nd on the southern shore of Georgian Bay on Lake Huron. Augmenting the locals was a boatload of 600 hardy souls who came from Midland, over 100 miles distant. With such a pro circus

atmosphere, is there any doubt that the business was excellent? That was the best business of the week as there was a series of four consecutive days of light houses before Galt on the 27th, broke the string with a good role call. On Monday the 29th, at Ingersoll, the show enjoyed good business and Charley the elephant enjoyed a good walk. He was reclaimed around six miles from the lot at a farm. He was probably investigating crop conditions. Robbins then took a very long mid-week jump of 136 miles to Windsor, across the river from Detroit. It was a late arrival but with the typical hustle, the performance was nearly on time. Big business followed for two days in winding down the Canadian tour which ended at Tilsonburg on Saturday, September 3rd. On September 1st in Chatham, (not on the route), a man claiming to be the son of Frank A. was arrested for borrowing money and incurring expenses in Robbins' or the show's name. In reality, the imaginative con man was James Dawson who was tried the next day in St. Thomas, Ontario, quick justice.

It was a 160 mile haul across the border at Niagara Falls en route to Brockport, New York. A fair number of American visitors were on the grounds at Brockport including Robbins' father-in-law who was born in Rhode Island in 1797. He was still very spry and was able to visit the show at several New York dates, to his great pleasure. It will be recalled that Robbins lived with Mr. Lawton in Newport, New York, when he (Robbins) first got married. The next day, at Newark, New York, the steam calliope arrived from Albany and was placed into immediate service. The show was heading east, just north of the Erie Canal with stops at Weedsport, Canastota, Rome and finally Little Falls on September 10. This last stand was only a few miles southeast of the company's former winter quarters at Newport where



Robbins still had many friends and more than a few relatives. *The Herkimer County News* commented that "[t]he people of this place and its visitors were agreeably surprised last Saturday. Although the Robbins Circus had been well advertised and its numerous excellent features brought to the attention of an attentive public, hardly anyone was prepared to see promises so well kept as these of Mr. Robbins. The attendance was larger than that generally looked for, filling almost all seats at each performance. . . . As special features we might mention the 8 trained elephants who dance the quadrille, going through the various figures with wonderful precision and waltzing better than some people we have seen. An elephant orchestra performed on the xylophone, bass drums, cymbals and accordion, making music which although open to criticism was all anyone could ask under the circumstances." The paper went on about various outstanding performers, the large and complete menagerie and the very fine management team including Loper and Cole in addition to Robbins. Good business prevailed throughout that entire week.

The show continued east along the Mohawk River valley until it reached Schenectady on September 14. The troupe then took a convoluted 100 mile jump to Salem which is within sight of Vermont, wheeled north to Granville on the 16th, and completed the week with another 100-plus mile late arrival to the southwest at Cobleskill. It took the troupe just two and a half hours after arrival to open the doors, an obvious team effort. With the exception of the latter stand, business ranged from good to excellent. Similar results were experienced the next week with Cooperstown on the 20th, New Berlin on the 23rd, and Waterville on the 24th, turning in *beaucoup* cash. At Cooperstown, the county fair was



underway but the show and the fair officials cooperated to ensure that both events complimented the other rather than promoting conflict. All other dates were in the black as well. Not surprising anyone, the weather was turning cold but it didn't appear to affect the locals. As September drew to a close, the show was moving west in the general proximity of the northern Pennsylvania border (the southern tier). Light rain was on the program almost every day but the take remained good. At Baldwinville on September 27, during the afternoon performance, a local lad of ten was standing outside the big top, about 50 foot distant. A bullet from Ira Paine's rifle penetrated the side wall and struck the lad in the elbow. It did not appear the wound was serious and the entire matter was promptly settled with the father by Messrs. Robbins and Paine. It wouldn't be too surprising if the settlement included several of the best seats with all of the lemonade and popcorn the boy could consume throughout the evening performance. The week and in fact the remaining couple of days of the New York tour were completed in fine style both in terms of business and the after notices.

The troupe left New York at Angelica on October 4, under a black cloud that reflected more than the raw, rainy weather, and proceeded into Pennsylvania at Port Allegany. Angelica's local paper, the *Allegany*

*County Republican*, was very generous in its praise of the performance and management. However, for the first time since early in the season, it commented in detail about scams around the company. It was stated, "there appears to have been a rascally lot of attendants selling reserved seat and other tickets, who made a regular business of defrauding or attempting to defraud every person possible. In fact we never before heard of such promiscuous attempts to rob people. And the rascality was not confined to any outside hanger-on or camp-followers of the show; but on the contrary . . . we have the proof that down right stealing was attempted by everyone." The article goes on to describe a whole host of examples. It continues for a complete column, giving examples therein. Robbins was called to the scene in order to satisfy the complaint. The next day, another scam was determined by the editor who went on to say, "Well, the show was then at Port Allegany, Pa.—40 miles away in another State—but we just trained our Jim Blaine battery that way and whirled on 500 pound solid shot whang over there, when back came a telegram: HEADQRS. FRANK A. ROBBINS' CIRCUS Port Allegany, Pa. Oct. 5 '87. Ed. Allegheny Co. Republican. Thanks for information: will send post order tomorrow. /S/ Geo. S. Cole, Assistant Manager. So Spencer has chances of rebate and may be known as a back-pay pensioner. And we think of running out a shingle as Claim Agent Generalissimo. . . . P.S. We suggest Mr. Robbins marshal his 150 employees to the chalk line and read this article to the entire gang." The show never played Angelica again.

Robbins played the next week in the Keystone State before exiting it at Hanover on October 12. Both Emporium on the 6th and Kane on



the 7th reported fine business. At the former date, the show followed Hurlburt, Hunting & Frost by two days, but it didn't seem to affect the take. The season's final few days were spent in Maryland. The show enjoyed big crowds and great reviews at Westminster on the 17th. Bert Cole, son of George Cole, was presented with a purse of \$150 by the show's personnel for his fine efforts as mail boy throughout the tour. Annapolis on the 18th and Harve de Grace the next day closed out the tour. The performance was relatively intact until the end as the reviews mentioned almost all of the featured performers in a most favorable manner.

So 1887 was brought in a winner. It formed the basis for the most ambitious step yet by Robbins, one not long in coming. As events transpired, one questions whether this season was as big a money maker as it appears. It is believed that the show's nut was very high. Not only did Robbins engage prestigious performers, who

could and probably did command the highest of prevailing salaries, but the wonderful elephant acts were leased and not owned. Adam Forepaugh must have demanded premium rates for the eight elephants he leased to Robbins. This act was apparently so good that it is a wonder that Forepaugh ever leased the act to begin with. It is recognized that Robbins required a large bank roll in order to embark on his next adventure and the better guess is that the 1887 season did not completely satisfy this requirement. So he had to borrow and borrow big. But who cared, there was big money to be made in the Big Apple and that is exactly where Frank A. Robbins was headed. He now had the plan and the wherewithal to successfully

address the largest market of them all! It must have been written in the stars all along.

### Winter 1887-1888 Big Apple, Bad Apple

Gotham City, unlike Batman's fictional home town, was the real thing to Robbins. It represented the consummate step in achieving his ultimate goal—national prominence for his circus and perhaps for himself. Consider the following: In a very short period, he had become the third

Forepaugh. But they were not outside his reach now. Is it not true that cosmopolitan Boston wrote his circus up as being a premier show? Didn't he play with success cities as close to New York as one could get without actually playing Manhattan? Had he not played the suburbs of Philadelphia, Washington, New Haven and Buffalo, receiving heady reviews and wonderful business? Was he not a member of the big time? Maybe yes, maybe no. Well, there was only one way to tell—

and that was a frontal assault on the biggest of the big. As the song goes: "New York, New York. If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere." It may be true, at least it was for Robbins. Why not a winter circus?

We all have an image of New York City today which may or may not actually reflect its importance to the United States. Our present image of New York could also have applied in 1887-1888. If you haven't thought about it,

think about what actually sets New York apart. New York was then and is now the only city in the world having the national financial center and not be the capital of the country in which it is located. It was not the largest city in the world back in the 1880's nor is it today. Best guess, London was so in the 1880's and Mexico City is today. London was predominant in the 1880's as the seat of the British Empire, but the financial power leveraged in New York wasn't far behind. New York's wealth had been built upon trade and railroads, and with both expanding, coupled with an ever increasing foundation of heavy industry, there was no way that the artificially stimulated British economy could possibly keep up. Much of its Empire was

**3.3.3. 3.3.3. 3.3.3.**  
**FRANK A. ROBBINS.**  
**RULE OF THREE.**  
**3d Largest Circus in the World.**  
**3d Week of the Winter Season.**  
**3 Reasons Why Everybody Should**  
**GO TO THE WINTER CIRCUS.**  
**!!! Because it is Fashionable !!!**  
**!!! Because it is Popular !!!**  
**!!! Because it is a Success !!!**  
**See Chas. W. Fish, Greatest Bareback Rider in the**  
**universe. See Baggerson, Supernatural Contortion-**  
**ist. See the \$125,000 Trained Elephants. See the**  
**great Davenes. See the Menagerie. See the beauti-**  
**ful group of Lady Artists. See the Prize Bicyclists.**  
**See the funniest Clowns in the world. See the**  
**Trick Animals. See it all.**  
**American Inst. Bldg., 3d-av. and 63-st.**  
**Twice a day, 2 P. M. and 8 P. M. Every seat a**  
**coupon seat. Prices 25 cts., 50 cts., and \$1.00, ac-**  
**cording to location. No bad seats.**

Newspaper ad for the Robbins winter circus in New York City. Author's collection.

most dominant show on the east coast. His show was highly respected from the entrance to the South, Virginia, to the northern most reaches east of the Mississippi, to the upper part of Ontario. His company had successfully played as far east as Prince Edwards Island and as far west as across the river from Detroit. He had played most mid size cities where he toured. Granted, he hadn't played the great cities of America; e.g. New York, Boston, New Haven, Buffalo, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, Washington and Chicago. Those cities had been and continued to be the special domain of Barnum and

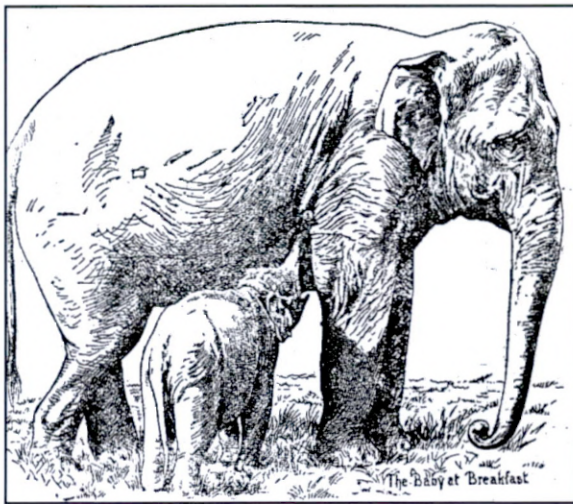


underpopulated, e. g. Canada and Australia, or industrially primitive, e.g. India. As a further damper to the English, they had to devote a significant portion of their gross national product to grow its navy to protect its far flung territories from ravenous nations such as the newly emerging German Empire and the oftines opportunistic French Empire. The United States had no such drains on its resources. On the contrary, singularly amongst the major powers, it had no territorial ambitions nor continental threats. The money it generated from its industry was poured back into expanding industry or developing new ones, and the hub of all this activity was New York. With its financial power base, there was a large middle class with disposable income. This was the circus-going public. Why not a winter circus?

London, and even Paris, Berlin and Rome supported winter circuses and the latter three cities were in the second rank as seats of financial power. In the case of Paris, it often had more than one winter circus. So why not New York? This was a city that was on the brink of a population explosion. The influx of immigrants over the next 30 years would balloon the population by millions. But even in 1887, New York had a population in excess of 1.6 million and at the time, New York consisted of only the Manhattan Island. Brooklyn, having a population of almost 700,000 souls, was a separate city. However, Brooklyn had recently become physically linked with New York (Manhattan) by the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883. More importantly, its population now had ready access to New York by the elevated lines that crossed the Bridge, which in turn were connected to a whole series of uptown directed elevateds. There were no subways until the early part of the 1900's. As such, we were no longer addressing a population of 1.6 million potential circus customers

but well over 2 million, all of whom having ready access to inexpensive, reliable rapid transit. And this potential circus audience does not even include The Bronx, Queens and Richmond (Staten Island) which consisted of many towns and villages with a total population of over a quarter of a million, almost all within 10 miles of Manhattan. With this accessible rapid transit system, why not a winter circus?

Robbins' apparently saw a need for top notch entertainment during the dead of winter. Many outstanding performers gravitated to New York because they resided there after the circus season closed in the fall, creating a large talent pool. These enter-



tainers represented the very best in the business, and if properly selected and rotated, could present to the demanding New York audiences, new and exciting programs at an attractive price. So the proper ingredients for a successful and permanent winter circus were present; available money, a significant customer base, a proven and reliable transportation system, and a large availability of talent. Why not a winter circus? All things considered, there was no way that Robbins could fail with his planned winter circus.

Where to locate this endeavor was the next challenge. An obvious choice was the well known cold and dank Madison Square Garden. This

was the original Garden and had been used by the Barnum circus for years. It wasn't well heated and certainly on its last legs as a usable arena. It was replaced within a year or so with the "new" Garden at Madison Square giving testimony that it probably wasn't particularly desirable for a winter circus. In addition, its condition may in fact be moot because it may not have even been available. Among other candidates, there was the American Institute, located on 3rd Avenue between 62nd and 63rd Streets. It was large enough to hold over 5,000 spectators and it was connected to the district steam heating system. As such, its existing infrastructure provided all the heat required to ensure that the public would enjoy the performance in comfort and the animals would be protected from the cold after the performances. Being of some age and enjoying frequent use, its location was well known to New Yorkers. Of great importance, the 3rd Avenue elevated train went past its front entrance and had a station right there. So the American Institute had significant pluses. On the negative side, it was a long distance uptown in an area recently developed with the prevailing five and six story walkups. The great population center was five or so miles to the south. In addition, the American Institute required the construction of seating which meant a very large up front investment, which didn't faze Robbins as his credit and reputation were excellent. Whatever financing was needed, it was available without any noted difficulty. On balance, it seems that Robbins' decision to create a winter circus located at the American Institute was sound and practical both to him and his creditors.

The first known public announcement about the pending winter circus was contained in the October 29, 1887 *Clipper*. It stated that, "Frank



A. Robbins has leased the American Institute building for five months, commencing in December. He will run a two ring circus in conjunction with a large menagerie. A change of bill will be made weekly, and stage performances of pantomime and like attractions will be done, especially at the matinees, when children and ladies are expected to attend in greater numbers. This is a big undertaking for Mr. Robbins, but his well known executive ability should carry him through successfully. The house will be arranged to seat about five thousand persons, and the opening will occur Dec. 24. This city should be able to support a permanent circus, and it now looks as if Manager Robbins struck a rich vein when the above arrangements were made."

Nothing about this ambitious plan was mentioned in the recently published 1887 Robbins route book, offered for sale by George Cole in the same *Clipper*. Charles Fish's letter to the *Clipper*, published in the same issue, indicated he had a good season on the Robbins Show and would probably be with it at the American Institute.

Although there was an enormous amount of activity required on the part of Robbins and his colleagues, there wasn't anything in the press about the coming circus until mid-December. In the December 17th *Clipper*, an expansive article brought the profession up to date: "Frank A. Robbins commenced last week active work in preparing for his opening at the American Institute building. Carpenters are now building seats, boxes, etc., for the inauguration of the circus season at this place. Mr. Robbins, in suing for metropolitan endorsement and patronage, is making the chief move of his eventful though quiet show life. His education in the business of the arena has been thorough and his training of the most careful kind. At the present time, his is one of the youngest, if not

the youngest circus proprietor in the country. He commenced when quite a lad, and, by hard work, attention to business, and his well known integrity, has risen step by step to his present high position. One of his most prominent traits is his excessive modesty, a virtue seldom found in a young and prosperous circus-man. His popularity and generosity are proverbial in the profession, and his many acts of genuine kindness to the unfortunate would take a volume to relate. Mr. Robbins is coming to this city with a show of greater magnitude than he ever yet handled. His reputation for the past few years as giving one of the best ring entertainments on the road is pronounced and



this new venture of his will, no doubt, sustain his claim. At the American Institute he will run a two ring circus, a fifty-foot elevated stage, a large menagerie, museum, etc. The prices are fixed at a popular, though not cheap, rate. The seats will all be reserved at 25 and 50 cents, while the box seats are placed at one dollar. Mr. Robbins has come to stay a few months, and this seems like a move in the right direction. Matinees will be given daily and special attractions will be introduced calculated to amuse ladies and children. He will, as far as possible, bring performers and novelties seldom, if ever, seen here. He takes just pride in his stock, and feels that the public will fully appreciate the high class animals he will bring here. The seats will be comfortable, and plenty of room will be allowed each person."

Although this is most likely a press release written in part or in whole by

the show's press corp, the description of Robbins' character appears to be based on fact. He was a high achiever and very well liked in business. He had a substantial following who wished him well. With regard to the planned price of tickets, it was in line with the theater prices. In fact, most theaters had a top rate at \$1.50 so the show was very competitive for this discretionary outlay of money.

The day earlier, the *New York Times* had an article provides a greater insight into the configuration of the arena being constructed, "Two rings and a central stage have been constructed in this building, surrounded by a bank of comfortable seats capable of accommodating nearly 6,000 people. A broad promenade has been laid out around the building back of the seats, which will be lined by the menagerie. In the ring, upon the stage and upon the swings and trapezes which are being suspended from the ceiling, 100 performers will disport themselves in a variety of acts,

many of which are said to be entirely original. One half of these performers are of the fair sex. There is also promised for the benefit of the children, and to the public at large, a group of well educated elephants and a cavalcade of trick ponies. The seats have been constructed with a view to the comfort of the public, rather than with the idea of packing the building, and as Mr. Robbins intends to change his programme each week, and to keep always in view the interests of the little people, the daily Winter matinees at the American Institute will be popular."

The comments regarding the little people are not throwaways but very important in Robbins selling his circus to the public. As he planned leased the American Institute for five months, he needed repeat customers. Half houses, totaling 5,000 customers per day, results in approximately 750,000 attendees over the



entire stand. Even New York with its great population, did not nearly have that many potential customers for his circus. Only with repeat customers could his nut be made. Realizing this, he devised at least two methods to give the show-going public a clear reason to come back to his circus a number of times. With a changing program, his performance could never be stale. Evolving every week, within a month, the performance would be so different that it would justify another visit.

Secondly, Robbins focused on creating a child-friendly environment. In particular, away from the performing arena were areas that featured acts peculiarly attractive to youngsters. He undoubtedly figured that some parents would be pleased to take their children to the circus more than once just to keep them quiet during the dark days of winter.

The *New York Times* carried a press release on December 23rd which discussed activities by certain wild beasts in the menagerie. Besides the fluff, it identified some of the animals presented and their means of transportation to New York. It appears that the cage wagons were shipped to New York, presumably from Frenchtown, New Jersey, in an empty condition. They may have so shipped to prevent exposing the contents to the winter cold. The animals arrived at the American Institute on December 22nd in "traveling boxes" and transferred to their cages upon their arrival. The "traveling boxes" were of small size and confining to the animals. They were described as looking like dry goods boxes. In any event, the article talked about a jaguar, a tiger, a lioness, and a black maned lion.

On December 23rd, one day before the formal opening, Robbins had a press and professional performance that was specifically dedicated to this non-paying audience. It was attended by representatives from at least

twelve local New York papers and the *New York Clipper*. To minimize repetition, the *Clipper's* review shall be set forth in detail, amplified by excerpts from the reviews of the twelve newspapers at hand. However, at the outset, it should be noted that all twelve newspaper reviews were very positive and the New York press corps was not an easy lot to please. The *Clipper* of December 31st states as follows. "FRANK A. ROBBINS' AUSPICIOUS OPENING. New York has been without a Winter circus for many years, and when Frank A. Robbins announced that he would



open one at the American Institute, Dec. 24, the people of the metropolis became much interested to see what this comparatively new manager would give for their delectation. Their minds were set at rest by the auspicious opening, afternoon of 24, when the show commenced a season that will last well into the Spring. Good taste and energy combined to make up one of the brightest and cleanest shows ever seen in this city, and those who attended were adequately repaid for their trouble. . . . The Institute is particularly well adapted for the purpose of a cold weather show, being well heated, lighted and ventilated. The two rings and elevated stage were occupied by single and combined acts which numbered sixteen on the programme, and embraced thirty-four distinct acts. The roster for the first week included: Professor Neil Smith and his canine wonders; May Vincent, the

'Queen of the Clubs'; Mlle. Madeline, of juggling fame; Captain Charles Englebrecht, the fencer; Baggesen, the 'Human Corkscrew'; Julia Lowande, artistic and graceful bareback rider; Mlle. Mario, attractive in her principal bareback evolutions; El Nino Eddie, Mlle. Amelia and Mlle. Natalie in tight and slack wire acts of high and pleasing merit; Mlle. Millie Tournour; Mlle. Loto and Mlle. Alma in aerial work which elicited hearty commendation; Charles W. Fish, the rider with a world-wide reputation who did his somersaults with the same grace and perfection for which he bears so high a repute; Johnny

Purvis and his donkeys, who caught on in great shape, evoking the most cordial endorsement, the little people being loudest in venting to their pleasure; Queen Sarbro, in the sword ladder act; Mlle, Alpetto on the horizontal bar; Estelle Hastings, a rifle shot of much skill; Andrew Gaffney, the cannon ball celebrity; Mlle. DeGranville, with the iron mouth and jaw; Vic Laselle, the balancer;

Rickford Bros., the well-known acrobats; Juliet Meyers, globe performer, and F. Cook in Scottish pastimes came in for liberal share of attention for their clever and diversified feats. Mlle. Saldee and Charles Watson, as hurdle riders, attracted favorable comment; William and Lucy Davene, in their daring mid-air work, fully merited the reception they received; Tony Lowande's riding of four horses showed much skill. The troupe of performing elephants, who do the most intelligent of acts, which include dancing the Lancers, waltzing and performing on various musical instruments, were an attraction of highly-trained animals, and will prove as taking here as they have on tour, where they enjoy the highest of elephantine reputations.

"The menagerie is of good proportions, and embraces many rare and handsome beasts. Freaks do not enter into the category of a well-reg-



ulated menagerie and Mr. Robbins has most wisely omitted such affairs. Everything is neat and clean, and the usual bad smelling effects are left out with the monstrosities. Since the opening, business has shown a handsome and substantial increase, and, even at this early day the stamp of success is plainly marked on the enterprise. Mr. Robbins is to be congratulated on so auspicious an inauguration. He fully intends to give even better performances as week follows week, and the cages will be rung in regularly every Monday. The daily matinees for ladies and children given will doubtless become popular."

There is no question that Robbins went all out to present an outstanding circus program. Not surprisingly, many of the acts were off the 1887 Frank A. Robbins road program but that was a plus because of their great skills. But Robbins did not stop there. He greatly strengthened his road performance with performers of equal caliber. *The Evening Sun* added the following insights: "The centre of the long floor is occupied by the elevated stage, and each end is a regulation circus ring. In the place of the familiar ellipse is a boarded walk, by means of which access to the boxes and the tiers of seats is made easy. The boxes skirt the ellipse all the way round. They are cosy and new, and so are all the seats, which rise back of them eight or ten tiers high. The entire structure has been decked in flags, streamers, coats of arms, &c. Quarters for animals and dressing rooms for performers are both sides of the building, while the menagerie is situated back of the seats, from which a stout wooded partition divides them. . . . The menagerie is of good size and remarkably sweet smelling. Electric lights in plenty and a powerful heating apparatus do their share of making the building comfortable. The attaches, too, seem more alert and more courteous than the usual run of circus supernumeraries."

The *New York Times* noted that "(t)he circus begins 20 feet from the outside walls of the building. That is,



The front cover of a children's booklet distributed at the winter circus. Author's collection.

a corridor 12 feet wide extends completely around the building, and is made attractive by the cages of wild animals, while the circus in the body of the hall contains seats for 3,000 (sic). . . . Prof. Neil Smith, with his troupe of trained dogs, who act as if they loved the mellow murmur of the people's praise, and his leaping cat Tiger brought forth a round of applause from the audience. Baggeson, the 'human corkscrew,' twisted himself into the most impossible positions . . . and there was a pretty little woman, Juliet Myers, who pranced about the stage on top of a ball about 3 feet in diameter which she rolled about with apparent ease as she stood upon it, at the same time performing some clever juggling. . . . Mlle. DeGranville, the woman with the 'iron jaw and teeth of steel,' swung about an iron chair with wonderful grace and ease, holding it by her teeth. A herd of eight performing elephants presented perhaps the best act of the performance."

In another article, the *Times* discussed the high cost of keeping elephants in the following manner: "The value of the eight musical and dancing elephants is \$125,000, the interest upon which sum is in itself an item of no inconsiderable amount. In addition to the double quartet, there is the clown elephant, Jack, which, although he is not as big as the others, has an appetite of no mean proportion. Each of these nine elephants consumes on an average 150 pounds of hay a day, besides a bushel of oats. With hay at \$16 a ton, each elephant eats about \$1.20 worth of hay daily, and oats at 44 cents a bushel brings the total daily cost of feed per elephant up to \$1.64. This makes the total yearly cost of feeding nine elephants \$5,287.40. Add the interest upon \$125,000 at 6 per cent, which is \$7,500. To this must be added the salary of the elephant trainer at \$75 a week for 30 weeks

each year and the wages of six keepers employed the whole year round at \$30 per month, making for the year \$4,410. By adding the cost of feed, interest, and wages together, it will be seen that for the brief amusement which the elephants daily furnish to the public, Mr. Robbins pays annually the sum of \$17,197.40."

Among other comments, the *New York World* discussed the elephants: "These ponderous beasts have been trained so perfectly that they executed a quadrille with a solemn precision, this at one marvelous and droll. Having gone through the figures of this dance they 'choose partners' and waltz in the giddiest fashion. They also have a military drill and perform an 'Anvil Chorus.' There is a notable performer, a contortionist, who calls himself Baggesen. He is a veritable human eel. Clad in shining scales of iridescent, flexlolo armor, he writhes about on the center stage, twists himself round like an animated corkscrew, sits on his own head and mixes up his anatomy in the most bewildering style."

The *New York Daily Tribune* observed that "(i)n the corners and



angles of the great building 'side-shows' novel and attractive are given and at stated intervals the 'man-fish,' 'Punch and Judy' and the tremendously funny marionette trick elephant, delight the youngsters." The *Tribune* also observed that, "Uncle Dan' Rice sat in a box . . . and talked circus here by the yard. In the course of his observations he remarked, 'Well Robbins ain't a robbin' anybody with this show.' Indeed, the venerable clown was greatly pleased with the Winter Circus."

The *Evening Telegram* provided a bit more on the children's circus, called the side-show by some papers: "Before and after each performance side shows are given for the benefit of the little folks in the anteroom, but the admission to the large show includes these as well without extra charge. In one room are a man and woman fish, who perform all kinds of marvelous feats in a tank of water; in another Punch and Judy hold forth, while a miniature circus is given by marionettes in still another."

Well, how about business? The avuncular *Clipper* would have us believe that initially full houses abounded. The *New York Morning Journal* must have got caught up in the hype because its reporter saw the throngs almost fighting in the street to purchase ducats. In fact this paper reported hundreds being turned away. As much as Robbins would have liked to believe what he was reading in these publications, the *New York Herald* probably had it much closer to real when it stated that, "(t)here was a fair audience in the afternoon and a better one in the evening, but the people will come eventually, for it is not too much to say, perhaps, that Robbins came here to roost."

The show made a nice hit in the sundry papers with a nuptial event. As the *Times* of January 3, 1888 reported, "Lucy Davene never made her aerial flight blindfolded more gracefully or with more feeling of security than last night at Frank A. Robbins Circus, in the American Institute building, when, instead as heretofore of landing in the firm grasp of a friend, it was the loving clasp of a husband. When the act was finished Frank Morris stepped

forward, and, in a voice that could be heard anywhere between Harlem Bridge and Fourteenth Street, made a neat speech and presented the bride and groom with a large beautiful horseshoe of roses, the gift of those connected with the circus company. . . . The audience looked like one of those that Barnum used to gather in Madison Square Garden. There were several circus parties at the show last night, one of which numbered over 30 persons, and the boxes were well filled. The act of the Davenes attracted the most attention, of course, owing to the rarity of observing a bride make a dive from the roof of a building into a net and turn somersaults in the air into the hands of a husband."

The *Clipper* continued to report excellent business. In its January 7th issue, it made a curious statement when it was related that "there was large and increasing attendance that has been the rule since the opening." It will be recalled that earlier the *Clipper* related that business was turnaway from the beginning. Of interest, it was stated that an

The back page of the children's booklet. Author's collection.

**SOUVENIR OF THE 8th TOUR**  
—OF—  
**FRANK A. ROBBINS'**  
**WILD WEST, HIPPODROME, MENAGERIE,**  
**== MUSEUM AND CIRCUS, ==**  
Direct from its glorious, successful and lengthy  
**MID-WINTER SEASON,**  
—AT THE—  
**AMERICAN INSTITUTE, NEW YORK CITY**  
—WITH ALL THE—  
SURPRISING, MAGNIFICENT, INSTRUCTIVE, SENSATIONAL  
AND UNPARALLELED FEATURES,  
Gathered from all quarters of the globe, regardless of expense  
and which literally  
**ENCHANTED THE MILLIONS**  
Of the Nation's Metropolis and elicited continuous  
**PLAUDITS FROM THE ENTIRE PRESS OF THE GREAT CITY.**  
—BY THIS—  
THE CHILDREN IN ECSTASIES!  
THE MIDDLE-AGED DELIGHTED!!  
THE AGED REJUVINATED!!!  
—BY THIS—  
VAST AGGREGATION OF NOVELTIES AND MARVELOUS ROUBSTRIAN MANOEUVRES  
**A MAGNIFICENT FREE STREET PAGEANT**  
In the Principal Streets at 9 A. M., will herald the arrival of this  
**THE GREATEST SHOW IN ALL CHRISTENDOM.**

"innovation—that of inviting the various theatrical companies now in the city to attend in a body the matinees given on Thursdays—has thus been most heartily appreciated."

It appears that fellow showmen believed that Robbins was doing just fine in New York. This confidence is evidenced in a brief note from Adam Forepaugh, Jr. dated January 13 requesting that "(i)f you can give Mr. Thos. Watson steady employment as long as you play in New York, you will greatly oblige both my father and self." Knowing Robbins as we do, chances are that Watson was immediately put on the payroll. The next day, the *Clipper* advised that "(t)he bill change from last week and introduced for the time here the Lamont Bros., acrobats of high repute. Harry Mack and his performing dogs; Alice King, the clever club swinger and several others of good reputation have joined. When melded with the retained acts the performance shall be even stronger which should stimulate even better attendance."

The next week's release was a bit more modest regarding business when the circus was reported "doing nicely." George Batcheller and George Bliss joined the performance, presumably both presenting their leaping specialties. In fact, the show reported that it recently instituted a "leaping tournament." The 50th performance was reached on Saturday, January 21, a significant accomplishment but only one third of the intended run.

Two articles were set forth in the *Clipper* of January 28, one clearly written before the other. The first article noted the addition of the clever aerialists, Stirk and Zeno. It also recognized that on January 30th, the world class sharpshooter, Ira A. Paine and his wife, would be joining the program.

The more important press release was that "Frank A. Robbins will close his season at the American Institute Building Jan. 28, making his total number of performances there sixty-two. Mr. Robbins holds the lease of the building for three months to come and will most likely, arrange for the



next four weeks, the balance of the time been taken for a horse sale.

"He has made an array of friends here, and will ever be kindly remembered for his endeavors in behalf of his patrons. He will move his animals, etc., to Frenchtown, N.J., on Saturday."

Just like that, it was over. What happened? Where did he go wrong? We know that he presented an excellent program and that the evolving performances were well received. The press was most generous in its praise of his performance and of him personally. It was noted that his newspaper advertising was limited to small size ads not unlike those for theatrical presentations. Initially there were ads every day; but those

ads soon were placed but once a week.

One must remember that there were over 20 papers in town so that the ad budget must have been very large. But this expenditure did not come as a surprise to anyone. It was a cost of doing business in the Big Apple. The weather was not particularly bad for that time of year and the "Blizzard of '88" was still a month or so in the future. The economy was vibrant as expected. So, what was the answer? It probably was as simple as New York was not interested in a winter circus, no matter how well it was presented. His failure in this great undertaking was financially devastating. It was his nature to

take chances, and he extended his credit to the limit in financing this endeavor. These debts were not close to being satisfied, jeopardizing his road show which was scheduled to embark on its tour in April. As for the Big Apple, Robbins never played it again in his long career. Although he lived there for years and wintered his circus for a long time across the Hudson River at Jersey City, for him the Big Apple was indeed a Bad Apple, and one bite was quite enough.

#### Correction

The 1885 Frank A. Robbins courier shown on page 14 of the July-August issue is from the Howard Tibbals collection and not that of the author.

## REPORT OF THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC. TRUSTEE MEETING IN NORMAL, ILLINOIS ON OCTOBER 6, 2000

The Circus Historical Society, Inc. board of trustees met in Normal, Illinois on September 6, 2000. Trustees in attendance were Richard J. Reynolds III, President; Al Stencell, Vice President; Dave Price, Secretary-Treasurer; Fred D. Pfening, Jr.; Fred D. Pfening III; John Polasek; and Emeritus Trustees Stuart Thayer and Joseph T. Bradbury.

President Reynolds announced that Trustee Robert Kitchen had resigned. Robert Sabia was nominated and elected to fill his unexpired term.

The trustees approved a resolution amending the Society's Code of Regulations (by-laws). The change provides that for all future quadrennial elections, Trustees shall be elected for terms of eight years (8) each. The change was to correct a typographical error in the original paragraph 4.05(b) of the Code. The amendment assures that very four years half the Board is up for election with the other half continuing in office.

The Board received a financial report from the Secretary-Treasurer. Although the overall financial condition of the organization was very good it was clear that for the fiscal year (1999-2000) expenses for producing and distributing the *Bandwagon* exceeded income from dues, subscriptions, advertising and sales of back issues by 27%. Postage rates have increased, especially in the postage due amount on returned magazines with address corrections.

This cannot continue if the *Bandwagon* is to remain the premier circus history publication our members have come to expect. The trustees agreed that the organization should not cut back on the quality of the *Bandwagon*.

After an extensive discussion it was determined that an increase in dues and subscriptions was necessary.

By resolution the dues was increased by \$7.00 in all categories. As a result membership renewals next spring will be \$32.00 (domestic) and \$37.00 each outside the United States.

The price for back issues was also raised to \$5.00 each.

The membership application was revised reflecting the new rates for all new members and subscribers.

The declining membership in the organization was discussed. Because of our aging membership the number of members has dropped due to deaths. This is addition to the usual lack of renewals by new members each year.

Trustee Robert Sabia volunteered to continue a campaign for new members by send a membership application and a CHS brochure to prospective members. This effort has been successful in the past.

The trustees discussed having an Internet web site designed. Trustee John Polasek was appointed to look into the cost of the design and placing it on the Internet. The CHS is listed on the Internet as a part of a list of circus organizations.

The question of increasing the organization's endowment was discussed. During the past few years a number of contributions have been received. The Circus Historical Society, Inc. is registered with the Internal Revenue Service as a tax free organization, allowing all contributions to be tax deductible. A number of the Trustees pledged contributions.

A complete report on the 2000 CHS convention will appear in the November-December *Bandwagon*.



# Early Equestrians of the Ringling Bros. Circus

## John Agee

By John Daniel Draper

John Agee, 1880-1951, came on Ringling Bros. Circus in 1897 as a seventeen year old, \$3.50 a week ring stock man. He continued on that show through 1918 and then on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for the next five seasons. He was assistant equestrian director from 1910 through 1915. On the death of Al Ringling, he became the equestrian director in 1916 and served as such through the 1918 season. Fred Bradna was named general equestrian director on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1919 and Agee was made equestrian director. From 1920 through 1923 Agee was assistant equestrian director to Bradna. Their duties divided something like this. In 1920, for instance, Agee was in charge of the parade while Bradna stayed back on the lot and looked after the show's interest while the parade was out.

As a performer, Agee advanced from jockey race rider in 1899 to pony Roman chariot driver in 1901 to manege rider in 1903. That last year, he married Sarah Grant and earned \$16 week. He enhanced his earnings by \$2 a week by selling and taking concert tickets. He successively became ringmaster, presenter of a pony act, Roman standing rider and rough rider by 1906. In 1908 he presented liberty horses and rode the famous manege horse, Bath House John, in addition to rough riding. The Agees' contract for 1911 was for \$40 per week for which he did a rough riding act, performed horses and ponies and was ringmaster. Sarah rode a manege act, if required, and both went into the tournament, entry and parade. He was also assistant equestrian director.

Starting at the age of eight, Agee, a native of Canton, Missouri, had been raised in a riding atmosphere. He

later went west to work on a ranch. In contests at Fort Riley, Kansas, he rode against cavalry champions at annual rough riding events and took most of the honors. In Mexico he engaged in a week's contest with Mexican riders. "He modestly admits that he is the only man who has ever been known to make Pres. Diaz rise up in his seat and clap his hands," noted a clipping in Agee's scrapbook at Circus World Museum. Also, he was a winner of the Richard K. Fox diamond medal at the Los Angeles Rodeo.

In his youth at a weight of 122 pounds his athletic record was prodigious. He was almost a whole Olympic team in himself. Some of his records were: 100 yards in 10 1/5 seconds, one mile in 4 minutes 18 1/4 seconds, running broad jump of 24

feet 1 1/2 inches, standing broad jump of 11 feet 5 1/2 inches and shot put of 44 feet 2 inches. He also excelled in boxing, baseball, billiards, wrestling, bowling, soccer football, swimming and diving and jockey riding. And he was a good shot.

In his rough riding on the hippodrome track in 1907 he did pick ups from the ground and mounts and dismounts, and he hung from the saddle head downward and supported himself from the horse's neck with toes pointed skyward, all at a thrilling speed. In another spot on the same program he rode an excellent manege act with graceful style. In 1908 he rode center ring manege with Jack Foley and Ann Jarvis in Ring One and Robert Stickney in Ring Three. That year in the hippodrome races he did his rough riding and lassoing in an absolutely fearless and reckless fashion as his steed entered into the spirit of the act.

The Minneapolis *Tribune* for February 19, 1908 reported: "John Agee, fancy and trick rider, and Sarah Agee, his wife, whose floral cart, with pony and dogs, is such a pretty novelty (on the hippodrome track) will rejoin Ringling Bros. for their 15th season. The greatest rough rider in the country is John Agee and the prettiest woman in the circus is his wife. They are almost indispensable in the equine department of the great show. She does the more genteel stunts of driving fancy trick horses and he is a ringmaster and leader in all the fancy riding. He is now considered the best in the business."

In 1909 on the Ringling show the wonderful Schumann horses, trained by Albert Schumann and introduced by Edward Wulff, appeared for the first time in



John Agee, animal trainer and showman. Circus World Museum collection.



America. There were four horses in the act, entitled the brewery act. The horses jumped in and out of big brewing vats placed side by side in the ring. After various difficult feats, the horses, displaying almost human intelligence, jumped through the immense double open ended barrels placed horizontally on a long flat wagon. As a finish they jumped into these barrels and were drawn out of the ring by a team of horses. Immediately following this display there was a clown parody of the act. Two pigs came in hitched to a small wagon on which were three small double opened ended barrels, each containing a small dog. The clown driver sat on a high seat above the barrels and a monkey walked at the back pushing this contraption with a long pole.

For the next four years Agee presented the brewery act "that had amazed all Europe." In later years he became the owner of the act and its props.

A news article from the Lynn, Massachusetts *Press* for June 3, 1913 gave an excellent description of Agee's duties as assistant equestrian director. The Ringling show had been in Lynn the day previously. Here is a paraphrase of that article: He had kept the various events going with the briskness and the accuracy for which he was noted. He had the responsibility of running off one of the most costly and elaborate programs presented under canvas. He kept track of 375 performers engaged in a multiplicity of turns and conducted the show so that all the events in one frame or display concluded coincidentally and did not lap over and thereby impair the continuity of the panorama.

Agee's eyes were keen and his whistle shrill. When he blew the whistle there was a "sharp response all along the midway of rings and platforms. Down out of the air came the aerialists who just before were flying and twisting from one trapeze bar to another. The teams on the platforms came to a prompt halt and equestrians leaped from their horses. The jugglers desisted and the head balancer became right side up again. The wire walkers returned to the



Agee and his liberty horses on Ringling-Barnum in 1919. Pfening Archives.

ground, also the high perchers, and the tumblers stopped. The contortionists untied the loops and knots in their supple bodies." All exited through the curtains that concealed on either side of the bandstand "the mysteries of the dressing tents." In came another array of performers. Veteran Lou Graham was the announcer for this vast array of entertainment and activity.

By 1914 Sarah Agee had added ballet dancing to her other duties and she was also went into the spec. Three years later Agee was in his second year as equestrian director of the big show with his salary advanced to \$70 per week.

John Agee had been held in high regard by Al Ringling. In the probated will of Ringling's estate, Agee was one of only five non-family members mentioned. Jimmy Whalen, Charles Rooney and Agee were each awarded \$5000. In March of 1916, when Ringling's body was committed to the permanent mausoleum, Agee was one of the pall bearers. That same month Mr. and Mrs. John Agee were among the limited number of guests that attended a 5 o'clock dinner given by Mrs. Al Ringling at her home followed by a theater party at the new Al Ringling Theatre.

During his years with the Ringling shows, Agee continued high school riding, frequently on the famous Dolly Varden. Also as a horse trainer, he frequently presented liberty acts. It is said that in his liberty horse training he usually employed a bamboo pole instead of the more usual whip.

He appeared with many of the top

equestrian performers of the day such as Adolf Hess, Manuel Herzog, Frank Miller and Rudolph Mayer. In 1918 Ernest Clarke was his assistant equestrian director. They "deserved paragraphs extolling the manner in which they maintained the smooth running aspect of the performance, one of its most remarkable features."

He entertained famous celebrities along the circus route. For instance, in Augusta, Georgia in 1919 he met the famous baseball player, Ty Cobb. After the show, Cobb took him for a visit to his beautiful home located nearby. When the show was in Los Angeles in 1922, Agee went out to Hollywood and stayed all night as a guest of Tom Mix, who had attended the afternoon performance.

A *Billboard* editorial appearing in May 1923 was based on an interview and in a very elegant way explained Agee's philosophy with regard to his career: "John Agee is equestrian director of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows. He appears in Display #19 with the numbered horses, which, unaided, find their own places in intricate drills and formations. The beauty of this display had a secret. Was it the horse or the man? The circus had gone last season before there was time to put the question. This year we went to headquarters the first thing to see what John Agee was like man to man. The thing that really sent us to Agee was the closing 'touch' of the act a year ago. After the eleven horses have pranced out of the ring the twelfth remains to make a bow, to take a curtain call, as it were, for the entire company. At the completion of the act Agee touched his fingers to No. 12's face in a tender caress that the human family will never improve upon. That 'touch' in itself gave the circus a heart and the horses a soul. I was not deceived.

"You walk into Agee's dressing room to meet a serious-looking, weather-complexioned man. The moment you say 'horses' his countenance lights up and his eyes flash fire. 'I am a horse nut,' says Mr. Agee at the start; and then you listen: 'Man has made the horse. They have



come down the ages together. They are inseparable. They have turned the plains into dwelling places. They have made civilization. The first things taken from King Tut's tomb were his chariots. The Greek statues of 500 B. C. show us the same horse that man knows today. Other animals have changed, but the horse, as man's brother and companion, remains the same. His seat of intelligence is at the top of the head, the same as his master's. Horses cannot think, but they can execute. They will give you results as soon as they understand what you want.'

"Do your horses like you?," I asked.

"They understand, like me, and they know my voice," was the quick reply. "When we opened in Madison Square Garden I hadn't seen my boys for six months. I was showing a friend some of the heavier horses that draw the wagons when I heard a whinny a little farther away. My horses were at dinner, but they stopped eating when they heard my voice. I went to them. 'Hullo, boys,' I said. Then they put their noses over the ropes and we shook hands.'

"Would No. 12 miss that caress at the end of the act?"

"Yes. That means something to both of us. There are two caresses. The touch of the hand and the caress of the voice. That is our language of approval. The horse must know the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. An abrupt, vigorous command is like a blow. That is the nearest we come to bad temper. Sometimes the trainer will lose his patience and sometimes the horse will; but when both lose their tempers together it is time to stop. Then there are two blundering fools instead of one. Affection is everything. If I ever go to the electric chair it will be because I saw a man abusing a horse.'

"Agee's eyes were a little wet by this time—much more had been said—and I was a little tight in the throat. Eloquence is moving. I had found the secret of that 'caress' in the equestrian act and it had proved exactly what I thought it would. Horses are human in their response to the 'touch' of the human voice. As I remember, Mr. Agee does not speak in

the ring. One can feel his eloquence in the personality of his animated step and in the behavior of his animals. It set me thinking to discover that this 'just a hard horseman' has the same touch of humanity in his voice that Edwin Booth had. He brings to his task all the knowledge of horses that books and art and the Museum of Natural History can unbosom to him. He can tell you every bone and cell in a horse's body. If you make the right impression on him he will quote the *Bible*, turn a mystical, quizzical eye upon you and ask you if horses go to heaven.

"If Mr. Agee were an actor, Mrs. Fiske would dote on his presence in her company. He would have some of her rhythm in expression, her depth of feeling, her affections. If he were a director of actors, would the animals stop their dinner to whinny at him? Fortunate horses in Display No. 19 in Ringling Bros. show.

"Mr. Agee, by the way, pronounces his name like two letters, 'A-G.' He is an American French-Huguenot and a descendant of Pocahontas. He ran away with the circus at fourteen and he holds the record for long service with Ringling Brothers having been with them for thirty years.

"Perhaps it is the equestrian voice that I like in the theater, with the 'touch' of a caress and the command of authority."

Beginning in 1907 and for the remaining years until 1923, the year Agee left Ringling-Barnum, he and his wife Sarah were also involved with the winter Shrine shows produced by Rhoda Royal. Most of his early experience with off-season indoor shows was obtained here. In addition to his high school riding, his

Another view of John Agee and his liberty act. Pfening Archives.



four horse liberty and trick horse act and his "desperate riding of the plains," he was also the arena or equestrian director for the Rhoda Royal Circus for 1910 to 1912. In 1912 he was assisted by John Carroll.

On the program for the Osman Shrine for 1908 Sarah Agee proffered her Arabian aristocrat driven to the floral cart and also her troupe of pert canines with the pony stallion York. In December of that year, at the St. Louis Coliseum, the Rhoda Royal Circus featured the rough riding of John Agee. He was the man who performed the most unheard of feats in the broncho saddle and tore around the hippodrome track with his head dangling in dangerous proximity to his galloping steed's hoofs.

On December 16, 1909 at a performance of the Rhoda Royal Circus at the Chattanooga Hippodrome, Agee rode against Saddler Schwartz of Troop G, 11th Cavalry. A contemporary newspaper account gave the details: "Alhambra Temple of Shriners and the Rhoda Royal Circus scored two more successes yesterday.

"A large number of cavalrymen from the fort were present. Their presence was to be accounted for by the fact that the star event scheduled for the evening was a riding contest between Saddler Schwartz of the Eleventh Cavalry and John R. Agee. Saddler Schwartz is a member of Troop G and champion rider of the Eleventh. In fact, he is regarded as one of the best riders and all-around horsemen in the entire army. Every cavalryman, if he does not know Saddler Schwartz, has heard of him. Agee is the champion rider of America. This title he has been called upon to defend frequently, but he holds it undisputed. He is a clean-shaven, young-appearing little fellow, every inch a gentleman and Mrs. Agee travels with him. The contest was one of the last numbers on the program and was for a gold medal offered by the management.

"Schwartz was the first to give his exhibition. When he made his appearance and bowed his acknowledgments, the soldier boys in the audience went frantic



with enthusiasm. They threw their hats in the air, cheered lustily and yelled themselves hoarse. Schwartz gave a remarkable exhibition of riding. At one time he failed to land on his mount after jumping to the ground and the horse got away from him, but he was soon on his back again and when he had concluded everybody, except those who knew Agee and his riding ability, were willing to wager cold cash that he had captured the medal.

"Agee had not been around the arena more than once before it was evident to all, even the friends and admirers of the cavalryman, that he had the latter beaten hands down. He was on both sides of his mount, on the ground and on top, going through the various maneuvers with such astonishing rapidity that the eye could hardly follow him. He concluded his stunt by riding around the arena standing on his head on the back of the horse.

"The ringmaster said that he would leave it to the audience to decide which had won the contest and it was unanimously voted to Agee."

At the Royal & Adams Indoor Circus in 1911 it was noted that the equestrian director and daring rough rider had come to Rhoda Royal's attention some fifteen years earlier on Ringling Bros. Circus and had made a rapid rise in his profession. The young man had "approached him one day and asked if he needed a man. He was small in stature and quite slender, in fact a very boyish looking figure. But his request amused Mr. Royal who engaged him to do chores and run errands for him.

"Throughout the fifteen years that followed Agee, for he it was, kept close to Mr. Royal, especially during the hours when he trained his horses. He soon learned the knack of handling the animals and in course of time he became one of Mr. Royal's most valuable assistants. Hundreds of the circus horses whose acts delight the public year after year in the big shows, it is said, received much of their training at the hands of Mr. Agee.



Agee and his beer barrel wagon. Circus World Museum collection.

"And so in a decade and a half the small, friendless boy has risen to the top of his profession."

Sarah Agee continued her manege riding on the Rhoda Royal Circus through the 1912 season as her husband continued as the premier saddle horse rider. The *Denver Post* in February 1912 noted that Agee had reared his mount, Bath House John, straight across the hippodrome track when the Big Rhoda Royal 2 Ring Circus, Hippodrome and Old Buffalo Wild West had played there. The role of Old Buffalo was played by Col William A. Lavelle.

The fact remains that not only did John Agee learn from his mentor to be a great horse trainer and performer but also to become a noted producer of winter shows. In this pursuit he came to the fore between November of 1918 and the spring of 1924.

On October 25, 1918 Agee and Oscar Lowande were "notified by the Liberty Loan Department that they are to receive diplomas for the wonderful work they did in connection with putting Chicago over the top for the 4th Liberty Loan. They conceived the idea of putting a circus on the streets of Chicago for the benefit of the loan. They were given carte blanche. They had enlisted the aid of the Bobker Ben Ali Arabs, Archie Onfri—comedy juggler, Art Adair and his clown band with Harry La Pearl, Phil King, Doc Stoddard, Rube Delroy, Harry Lafleur, Tom Sanger, Roy McDonald, Louie Plamondon, Archie Onfri, Ike Lewin; Irene Montgomery—swinging ladder act—worked 4 stories above the ground without a net; Lowande put on the famous Topsy Turvey Riding Act with Mrs. Lowande; Mr. Agee gave

talks for Liberty Loans. The Circus was staged at 3 of the busiest corners in the city including State and Madison. It stopped traffic for 45 minutes. They were credited with selling over one million dollars in Government bonds.

They took their lives in their hands with the hardest possible conditions in the open and on the slippery streets. They were in danger of catching severe colds from becoming overheated and then getting chilled while appeals were being made for bond purchasers. It was grand work by those who do not think of themselves when they can boost a good cause."

On December 14th, Agee opened his Christmas Tree Festival and Animal Circus at the Chicago Coliseum before a crowd of 20,000. Colored lights were on the outside and wonderful decorations were within. Agee, the prince of equestrian directors, presided over probably the best one ring circus ever, every act a feature. Among other attractions were Robinson's military elephants; Madame Bedini's four high school horses; Oscar Lowande's bareback riders; Irene Montgomery, the flying fairy; Agee's baby elephants, ponies and dogs; Mr. & Mrs. Doll, dancing midgets; Delgarian's camels.

Agee's Big 20 Act All-Star Circus played a most successful engagement in Washington, D. C. on February 14 to 21, 1920. The show was under the auspices of the District of Columbia Department of the American Legion and the patronesses were headed by Mrs. Woodrow Wilson and Mrs. Thomas R. Marshall. The Honorary Committee was headed by Vice President Marshall and the Speaker of the House of Representatives. Agee made a host of friends there and President and Mrs. Wilson autographed tickets for him. Features of the show included Agee, equestrian director; Merle Evans, bandmaster; Aerial Troy, trapeze contortionist; the Stickneys, bareback and Indian riding act; Raymond's novelty iron jaw and wire performers; Irene Montgomery, flying ladder; the riding



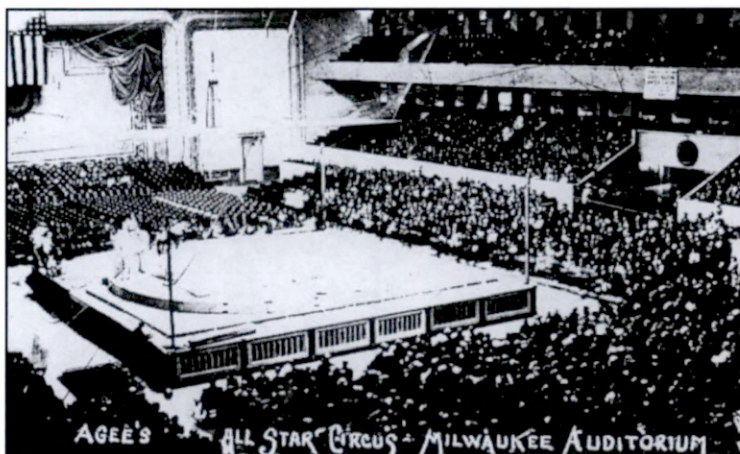
mechanic; Lillian Russell, balancing trapeze; Riding De Motts, bareback and carrying act; Great Paldrens, jumpers and airplane spinners; Fred Stelling, clown; Rice, Bell and Baldwin, comedy acrobatic clowns and others.

For the week of February 25th to 28th, the circus played for the benefit of the Richmond, Virginia Post of the American Legion. General Pershing was the guest of honor at the opening.

In 1921 Agee had winter circuses in Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Omaha and Sioux City. His 12 shows for the Zuhrah Shrine at Kentwood Armory in Minneapolis grossed \$40,000. The performance of 20 of the finest circus acts included Merle Evans' band; Jones' African Lions; the five Riding Rooneys with comedian Reno McCree, Jr.; Art Adair, clown; Edna Curtis' eight trained canine wonders; Charles Rooney, somersault rider; the riding mechanic act; Robinson's military elephants; Hall and Fuller's unrideable mule; and the Siegrists, aerialists, etc.

After the closing of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's 1921 season, Agee dropped off the train in Baltimore with a string of bronchos and other wild west paraphernalia which were used in staging a rodeo for the entertainment of visiting foreigners at an Armistice Day celebration.

At Minneapolis, Agee's All-Star Circus Shrine date had phenomenal success in the first week of February 1922. The program was under the direction of Dennie Curtis. The outstanding presentations included Roy Lewellyn's Four Kings of the Forest, mammoth Nubian lions; Virginia Bell, prima donna on a beautiful white horse; the Clarke and Correia Troupe of bareback riders, featuring Percy Clarke and Johnny Correia; the Royal Brothers, equilibrists and hand-to-hand balancers; Lillian Kincaid, aerial butterfly; Madame Bedini with her liberty and saddle horses and Sir Victor with his dog and pony act; Lorette, famous clown cop; Mr. Agee's "Sure Cure for the



Agee's All Star Circus for the Shrine in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1922. Circus World Museum collection.

Blues" with his riding mechanic for the children; Al Langdon with elephants Boo and Ding; and the Kenneth Waite Trio, comedy acrobats. The conclusion featured the Famous Clarkonians, great aerial performers.

After Minneapolis, the show played a week in Omaha followed by another week in Milwaukee.

In December of 1922, Agee had big plans for his All Star Circus for 1923. An ad in *Billboard* stated: "Wanted Circus Acts—John R. Agee's All Star Circus—High Class Circus Acts of all kinds; 5 consecutive weeks. Opens January 29th—Fargo, Minneapolis, Duluth, Milwaukee, Sioux Falls, Sioux City, Omaha. Performers previously engaged wire immediately. Transportation paid after joining. Greatest one ring circus in the world. Write or wire—John R. Agee, Baraboo, Wisconsin."

He actually did play for the Duluth, Minnesota Shrine the following February. In March of 1923 his show passed through Chicago on its way home to New York to close its winter engagements. Among the acts represented were the Clarkonian, aerialists; John Correia, equestrian; Capt Frank Huling, seals; De Coe and Ritley, Upside Down Dooley; Rice Trio; Albert Powell; Mr. and Mrs. Agee, etc.

The next month at the Big Show's opening in Madison Square Garden, Agee declared that he was with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for life. As it turned out, 1923 was his last season.

Agee announced in October that he would be promoting indoor circuses as usual for the winter season of 1923-24, already having some big dates booked. In *Billboard* for January 26, 1924 he was still advertising for circus acts: "Wanted—Circus Acts. John R. Agee's All Star Circus. Zuhrah

Temple, Minneapolis, Minn. One Big Week, February 25th to

March 1st. Wanted—Circus Acts of all kinds, all of best riders, aerialists, clowns, acrobats, animal acts, performing horses. Last and biggest Indoor Circus of the Winter. Good horse trainers, not engaged, write John R. Agee, Stratfield Annex, Bridgeport, Conn. Watch for Big Summer Announcement."

Two months later Agee concluded a very successful season with his winter circus and came into the old Ringling quarters in Baraboo, Wisconsin. At that time it was officially announced that he would not be with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1924 and that he was reorganizing his circus. His stellar lineup at the Zuhrah Shrine had included the Codonas, the Davenport Family's bareback act, Betts' seals, Agee's performing horses and the brewery act and a wonderful clown alley headed by Art Adair with Felix Adler, Art Plunkett, Lorette, Rice Trio, etc.

Agee's new venture, as equal partner with John M. Kelley, Ringling-Barnum legal counsel, was Fun on the Farm. It was framed in Baraboo. It was an entirely new concept, dealing with the farmer, farm products, especially milk, and farm problems. It was as far removed from the circus as the opera and still it carried horses and fine trained animals and great clown numbers. It was designed to show at fairgrounds but not at fairs and it was backed by the farmer, business men's clubs and civic organizations.

Starting at Baraboo in a stormy downpour on June 7, 1924, the show's entire route was limited to Wisconsin, except for one brief excur-



sion into Illinois in August. It closed at the Wisconsin State Fair in Milwaukee in the last week of August. It played without canvas, mostly one day stands with a few two day stands, in front of fairground grandstands.

How could the entertainment features come from the farm? The hills and dales of Wisconsin were dotted with fine bulls. Therefore, bulls should be part of the entertainment and do something no one had ever seen them do before. Agee went to work to train the bulls in a barn locked safe against curious visitors. For his part Kelley let it be noised about the state that there was a Great Green Bull with golden horns, imported from Dublin, Ireland and fed mostly on imported shamrock silage. This wonderful creature would be seen at the show.

The program was accompanied by excellent band music. First came a beautiful riding act with eight circus riders, headed by Agee. Then came the McCree-Davenport riding act followed by King Jess, a statue and contortion bull, pure bred white Holstein and Agee's pupil, which could deftly put a foreleg across his neck and back of his horns. Next came a unique clown walkaround, conceived by Kelley. A clown farmer dug with a hoe, unearthed coins and opined "farmin's good biz if you just keep diggin." Each time he placed a coin in his pocket, another clown behind him, of whom there were several, would filch the money from his pocket, the filcher bearing on his chest a placard labeled with one or the other of the forces that gets the farmer's money as fast as he digs it out of the ground. Then came in order several units such as "Country Gentleman" in a buggy with Agee; the Green Bull led by Mrs. Charles Pitzke of Stetsonville, widely known at fairs; the modern pyramid—clowns representing different agencies of farm relief, such as politicians, attempting to move the pyramid. It resisted their efforts. The pyramid was finally brushed aside by the clown representing Kelley's idea of the proper antidote to the farmer's problem; Agee riding King Woodford, famous dancing horse; Ike Armstrong, head trainer under Agee, bareback riding the bull Bill. The bull ran the ring as



Agee in John M. Kelley's Fun on the Farm show in 1924. Circus World Museum collection.

true as the best rosinback and took hurdles like a high jumper; another Agee product, "Civilization at Its Worst," the injurious effects on a number of pretty girls, with exaggerated lipstick and make-up. Through the good example of another pretty girl, the public was adjured to keep to the road to health through the use of dairy products; Mrs. Lulu McCree, bareback riding number; "Rock-a-Bye Baby Bull," Agee's supreme achievement, a bull swinging in a huge swing in mid air. Also, there was Agee's silo act. This was an adaptation, with the original props, of the old Schumann brewery act brought to Ringling from Europe in 1909. Now the huge double open-ended barrels were represented as sections of a large silo through which the horses leaped. Later the barrels were placed on the original wagon and the act proceeded as the original brewery act. Finally, there were chariot races and Roman standing races on the half mile track.

As a background to all of these acts was the side show canvas with an ornate banner line by Driver Bros. of Chicago. The side show featured the Farm Follies with animal impersonations and the mechanical cow. There was also a clown college where local boys were taught the art of making up as clowns.

The show carried about 60 people. The ring stock was under the supervision of Buster Rooney, son of the veteran boss hostler Charlie Rooney. The performers were costumed in brilliant wardrobe. The concession department sold candied apples, a new milk drink being introduced under the trade mark of Omo, hot dogs and toy balloons.

Very early in January of 1925, Agee performed at the Hippodrome in New York City with his three horses and Bill the bull. This was his first appearance there on the vaudeville stage. The beautiful horses executed their turns without either verbal command or any cue from the whip. They jumped onto large barrels and into them while on the floor and later on the specially built wagon in the standard brewery act. Ike Armstrong rode Bill and, with Agee holding the restraining rope, put him through a short routine of stunts. Although the bull was sometimes reluctant to follow his cues, the things that he did were quite remarkable. However, the next week Bill was no longer on the roster.

About this same time there was a neat publicity stunt for Agee's animal act at the Hippodrome. Ingrid Landon, one of the show dancers, "on a dare," rode the big red bull from Agee's act on 43rd Street between 5th and 6th Avenues.

Agee and his performing horses proved to be very popular and were still at the Hippodrome through the



middle of April.

For the first part of 1926 John Agee played vaudeville dates on the Pantages Circuit of theaters in the West. He first had his horse act in Spokane where the showfolks on the bill got together and gave a birthday party in his honor. Mrs. Agee served the refreshments. From the middle of March until the latter part of May he was at theaters in Los Angeles where, with Tom Mix, he did a whip cracking and target shooting turn. Their comedy took the house by storm. In a picture taken at that time, Agee is holding an autographed Stetson presented to him by Tom Mix.

Later that year a Russian Cossack Troupe came to New York and lost heavily at a Madison Square Garden engagement. After that financial failure, John Robinson personally reorganized and Americanized the troupe and a new routine was furnished by Frank Wirth, Robinson and Agee. Additional new acts offered were Agee's horses, John Kelley's educated bull, the Funny Ford of Cook and Wiswell and fourteen Arabs. The rejuvenated troupe went to Cleveland where it opened to very good business. Its success there, as a box office attraction, was attributed to the new routine. However, a projected three week engagement in Chicago had to be canceled because of lack of interest.

In 1927, after appearing on Harvey's Indoor Circus with his brewery horses and trained bull, Agee debuted in the musical comedy, "Polly of Hollywood," as a legitimate

Agee and his horses in Luna Park, Coney Island, New York in 1927. Howard Tibbals collection.



actor. This show premiered at Atlantic City on February 7th and then moved to New York City to the George M. Cohan Theater. Agee had an important role in this Will Morrissey production. In one scene actress Midgie Miller appeared astride the back of Agee's bull singing "Throwing the Broadway Bull." In another scene, King Woodford, Agee's dancing horse, did the "Black Bottom" accompanied by the chorus. Agee proved to be a good pistol shot as he hit targets held by Midgie Miller. There is an interesting photo of Agee and his Broadway Bull generating publicity for the show as they held up traffic in Times Square on their way to the George M. Cohan Theater.

In July of that year it was rumored in a *Billboard* article that Agee was "going to invade the circus field next season with an up to date motorized outfit. Time will tell." Instead, as it turned out, for the 1928 season Agee, with his trained Broadway Bull and the four brewery horses, played at Luna Park's Free Circus at Coney Island, New York for 10 weeks. Following that engagement, in August 1928 he had his trained horses and the bull on Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West when it showed in New York City.

Tom Mix considered Agee the greatest outdoor performer at that time before the public. "John is a splendid boy," Mix stated, "but has failed to capitalize on his inherent talent in the fullest sense of the word. Since John has become my assistant and has heeded my advice, he has started to do some real serious thinking. That's the trouble with most performers. They fail to think. They are a mere cat's paw and lean

heavily in the wrong direction. No one can hope to attain success without using his mental powers. This applies to a museum going folk. Give them something to think about and they will appreciate you more than ever. That's one of the

unfailing secrets of success."

Agee sold his Broadway Bull and brewery horses to Tom Mix in 1929 for a high figure. Agee had been presenting these acts since leaving Ringling at the end of the 1923 season. He was now on Mix's payroll and expected to cast his lot with Tom Mix for the rest of his life.

Agee performed on Sells-Floto from 1929 to 1931. In 1929 Tom Mix rode around the arena on Agee's black steed and also worked the brewery horses. Agee made the concert announcements and in the after show as a cowboy did Australian whip cracking with Mrs. Joe Bowers who was also in the act. The Broadway bull was ridden by Joe Bowers.

After Mix joined the Floto show in Boston on May 27th, business moved to a higher pitch. In order to carry the extra equipment for the enlarged show, the train was increased in size from 30 to 38 cars. The extra cars took care of the increase in size of the big top from a seating capacity of 7000 to 10,000 and the addition of two extra 50 foot center pieces. There were now two stages in addition to the three rings. Two of the cars were assigned to Tom Mix. One was Mix's special parlor car which had specially equipped stalls in the front end for his three pet horses, Tony, Buster and Buck. He traveled in this car in regal style with Agee and Pat Chrisman, his manager and the developer of Tony. The second car was given over to his supporting company. Tom Mix had 24 cowboys who whooped it up in his wild west concert contingent under the expanded six pole big top.

Agee closed with Sell-Floto for the season in Chicago in November and the next week was on hand at the Tex Austin Rodeo at the Chicago Stadium.

Early in January 1930 he was busy at Peru quarters breaking new horses for the coming season. He left in February for Miami where he met Mix. They went from there to Sarasota in time for the Sara de Sota celebration and then back to Peru. Mix and Agee had planned to do winter vaudeville dates but they had to cancel them because of an injury to Mix's shoulder which required a plaster cast. The injury had occurred



the preceding September at Dallas when his mount, Paleface, slipped on the muddy track just before taking a hurdle, threw Mix and hurt his shoulder. Eventually the injury was healed sufficiently to make it possible to remove the cast and everything was on schedule for the spring opening of Sells-Floto.

However, in 1930 Mix was not the magnet he was in the previous year when he was the greatest drawing card under the white tops. In 1930 he rode Tony in high school steps, worked the trio of Agee's liberty horses and did the brewery act. In display #9 Agee worked one of the show's three big liberty acts with Rudy Rudynoff and Merritt Belew appearing in the other two rings.

On the average in 1930 seventy five percent of the audience remained for the concert, which featured Mix and his wild bunch of thirteen cowboys and cowgirls, including Agee, Hank Durnell and Colorado Cotton in lively riding and roping. Mix did gun spinning and shot at objects thrown into the air. Agee and the Australian Waites entertained with whip cracking and also there was Agee's bull.

On the first day of December one of the barns at Peru winter quarters was destroyed by fire, but Tony was miraculously rescued.

In 1931 a big rodeo was held at Peru quarters before the departure of the show for Chicago. This highly billed affair was held on Easter Sunday, April 5th. Earlier in the spring Mix had lived at the Bearss Hotel for a few weeks before moving into his private car down in the railroad yards. That winter he had signed a new five year contract with the Ringling shows.

Agee and the two dozen cowboys and cowgirls had been getting ready for the spring opening. That year Sells Floto had a big top made up of a 160 foot round with five 50's and with a 10,000 seating capacity. Mix, again the center attraction, did all the acts he had done the previous year. However, he and most of his troupe were in the big show performance only at Chicago. On the road they were only in the after show. The three liberty acts in the big show were presented by Agee, Rudy Rudynoff and Gordon Orton. In the

center ring and then on the track, Agee and Joy Smith each drove a hackney hitched to a fine harness buggy in beautifully executed manege acts. At one point the horses would sit down on their haunches while hitched to the shafts of the buggies. The wild west after show featured a Congress of Rough Riders with Mix and Tony, Agee and the Australian Waites in whip cracking and Colorado Cotton and his wild west bunch.

Just after the end of the season, Mix was scheduled to make his first talking picture, one with Universal Picture Company.

In 1932 Mix took a new bride, a 28 year old aerialist, Mabel Hubble. They both resented much of the portrayal of the circus in the movies and they planned to make a movie of the "real" circus.

The following year in February Tom Mix retired the original Tony. He had paid \$12 for him many years before. The horse was now over 13 years old. Mix embarked on a personal tour of the movie houses of the country. He had a great all white motorized outfit that exhibited Tony, Jr., Agee and other helpers were with him on the tour.

In January 1934, Sam B. Dill and Tom Mix formed a partnership to operate the Sam B. Dill's 3 Ring Circus and Tom Mix Roundup. Mix was managing director and Agee was equestrian director. Agee wore the costume of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. This was a 50 truck show under a big top of a 120 foot round with three 40's. Mix and Tony, Jr. appeared in the spec and with the high school horses. As part of the manege act on the track, Agee directed his horse while riding in a sulky. Sarah Agee presented Hosana, the posing horse. The concert featured



Tom Mix and John Agee on Sells-Floto in 1929. Pfening Archives.

Mix and his company in trick roping, riding and shooting.

Sam Dill was now in very ill health and on December 17th he sold his interest in the Circus to the Roundup Amusement Co., which Mix headed. Dill died of lung cancer on February 1, 1935 at the age of 50. Tom Mix took over the show and operated it as the Tom Mix Circus from 1935 through 1938.

The careers of Agee and Royal came together again in 1935, the first time since 1912. Agee was on the Tom Mix Circus in 1935 and again in 1937 to 1938, while Royal was there from mid season 1935 until mid season 1937.

The Tom Mix Circus was a large show in 1935, traveling on 71 trucks with a big top consisting of a 135 foot round with three 50's. Agee was the equestrian director. Rhoda Royal came on the show in mid season.

In January at Compton, California, Agee with his assistants was working a lot of new manege stock and he stated that the horse numbers would be a big feature in 1935. By February, Manager Dale Turney and Agee were arranging the routine of the program, which would utilize sixteen head of manege stock



and five specialty horses. Ed Hendershot was working new numbers with the wild west stock.

When the season got underway, the performance, under Agee's direction, moved smoothly throughout. Mix had new horses in the brewery act. They jumped through the half barrels, then on top of the barrels and for a finish through the barrels mounted on the old time brewery wagon. While sixteen women performed in the big manege acts, Agee drove Gowan, an English hackney hitched to a light fine harness buggy. Later in the season Royal also drove a second hackney hitched to a similar buggy. Agee did a whip cracking act in the wild west.

While Royal returned to the Tom Mix Circus in 1936 as equestrian director, Agee went over to the newly formed Ken Maynard's Diamond K Ranch Wild West Circus which opened at Van Nuys, California on May 2nd. He was the equestrian director and in display #13 was with Maynard's famous liberty horses which he had trained. The eighteen display program was headed by Ken Maynard on his horse, Tarzan, and consisted mostly of wild west acts. There were 25 cowboys including Silver Tip Baker and the Indian Congress was in two sections. The women trick riders were Shirley Griffin, Vernice Mitchell, Rhea Jack and Paris Williams. Joe Metcalf had the elephants and Charles Redrick was the band director.

Weekend dates for a time were scheduled at the ranch and it was not definitely decided when the show would go on the rails. In spite of splendid notices in the press, from the beginning the show had tough going. It just did not draw the audiences expected. The idea of weekend performances at the ranch was abandoned and the show played three days, May 5th to 7th, just outside of the fairgrounds in San Diego. Business was not up to expectations. The show closed and practically all of the employees, except the animal caretakers, were released.

Royal was the original equestrian director on the Tom Mix Circus in 1937, serving until he resigned in mid season. Agee again became equestrian director and served as

such through the following season.

In 1937 Agee produced the Gala Garland entry. In display #6 Mix presented liberty and manege horses in the center ring supported by Agee and Homer Hobson, Sr. with hackney horses in the end rings and a large cast of skillful riders. The thirteen women manege riders on the track included Carrie Royal. Liberty horses were featured in display #13. Royal, later replaced in mid season by Homer Hobson, Sr., presented four; Max Gruger had six and John Agee had four.

The performance in 1938 ran for two hours and fifteen minutes and was directed by Agee, assisted by Herman Nolan. Also on the staff of equestrian directors were James Arbaugh and Homer Hobson, Sr. In display #24 the liberty acts were presented by Herman Nolan, John Agee and Homer Hobson, Sr. In center ring Agee presented his act without use of either whip or verbal cues. The big manege act was display #22. There were twelve mounted high school horses, Agee being one of the riders. Nolan directed the act's routine. In the concert Tom Mix was the chief cowboy. Agee and fifteen cowgirls and cowboys, including Nolan, participated in wild west riding and other events.

In June 1938 John Agee received word that his wife had died in North Hollywood, California on the 18th. Agee flew home from the Tom Mix Circus. Four days later she was buried at Forest Lawn. They had been married for 38 years and both had grown up on the Ringling show.

Business for the Tom Mix Circus had been very good during the previous three seasons and for the first half of 1938. However, by August it began to fall off and the season was finally closed on September 10th at Pecos, Texas. The show was finished.

Soon after Mix began a tour of personal appearances in Europe and the British Isles which lasted into 1939. He returned to the United States and appeared at the Million Dollar Pier in Atlantic City with his western troupe. He contemplated re-opening his circus in 1940, but did not do so. On October 12, 1940 Tom Mix was killed south of Florence, Arizona in an accident while driving alone at 80



John Agee in his Mountie costume on Tom Mix Circus. Pfening Archives.

miles per hour in his Cord automobile. He was en route from Tucson to California via Phoenix.

In 1940 Agee was equestrian director for the St. Louis Police Circus. That year he worked with Gene Autry at Republic Pictures in Hollywood.

On August 22, 1942 Agee married Irene Malick at Melody Ranch in the San Fernando Valley. At that time he was still employed as Gene Autry's horse trainer.

John Robert Agee, age 71, died on October 28, 1951 in San Fernando, California after an illness of several months. He was survived by his second wife and by 2 sons, Johnny and Elmo, of the previous marriage.

Agee was a person of close and faithful friendships with both Rhoda Royal and Al Ringling. His service to both of these men and what he learned from them resulted in his becoming a consummate trainer and performer of equines and a very successful producer of circus entertainment.



# Side Lights On The Circus Business

## PART FOURTEEN

By David W. Watt

*Editor's note. The dates listed are the days the articles appeared in the Janesville, Wisconsin Gazette.*

**April 18, 1914**

It was in 1882 that the Adam Forepaugh show reorganized on the 14th of September and started for a tour through the southern country. Later we made a long Sunday run to Holly Springs, Miss., arriving there early in the evening in a cold and drizzling rain. On Monday we gave two shows which was (sic) out of the ordinary in a small southern town. Arriving at Holly Springs, we found George K. Steele, the advance agent of the show, there ready to receive us. It was my business to pay the transportation to the railroad agent there, and Mr. Steele said to me, "When you go to pay the transportation agent in the morning, I will go with you for the agent here was an old friend of mine back in the early sixties."

George K. Steele was a sergeant in the Union army and was stationed just outside of Holly Springs with a few men to guard a high bridge, and this same railroad man was postmaster at that time. Although he was a southerner, he and Mr. Steele became fast friends. After the close of the war, Mr. Steele came back north and engaged in circus business and long since had forgotten his old friend. When he arrived in Holly Springs some four weeks ahead of the show to make the contract, he found his old friend still there but in new business, that of agent for the railroad company. Mr. Steele's friend insisted that he and I should take dinner with him at five o'clock at his home. This we did, and it was certainly a change for the old colored lady that did the cooking well knew how to fry chicken which at that time was a specialty with the southern people.

They lived in a small modest

five-room cottage which occupied an entire block of ground, and back on the corner of the lot stood a small log house of two rooms where the colored man and his wife and six children lived. The railroad agent told us that he hired the man and wife for \$12 a month. Mr. Steele said to him, "I don't see how it is possible for them to live on that amount." "Well," the agent said, "if you paid the grocery bill, I think that would explain it. It is very few groceries they buy and all the potatoes and vegetables are raised here on this block of ground." This long trip of the show of nearly two months and a half through the South was one thing that Adam Forepaugh tried hard to forget, as the show lost on this trip about \$50,000.

On Saturday last, April 11, the great Ringling show opened the season at the great Coliseum in Chicago. Their engagement there will close on the 25th of this month, and then the show will go directly to St. Louis where it will open for a five days' engagement. At their close in St. Louis they will start east; and after

Ringling played in the Coliseum in Chicago. All illustrations are from the Pfening Archives.

making a few towns in various states, they will go into Canada where they will show in the larger cities and later will come back to the states in the middle west and possibly along in the middle of the season may show in Janesville. I expect soon to spend a day with the show in Chicago and next Saturday will try and tell you something about the great show and who's who and what's what.

While the Sells-Floto-Buffalo Bill shows were at Albuquerque, N. M. it was learned that Maude Rollins, equestrienne, who died Sept. 9, 1913, was buried in the Santa Barbara cemetery at Vaughn, N.M. So a purse was made up and a wagon load of flowers purchased. Thursday, March 26, a company of circus performers and a number of the officials paid tribute to her memory, taking with them Omar, the calico horse that she rode in her act with the Sells-Floto show two years ago. At the cemetery the flowers were strewn upon the grave and the bare mound flamed into glory.

The next day the members of the circus contributed to another fund with which to erect a monument at the grave, bearing the inscription "Maude Rollins. Died September 9, 1913. In Loving Remembrance, Sells-Floto Show Company."

In trying a new aerial stunt with her sister which she hoped would be accepted by the Barnum & Bailey management later in the season, Ella Hackett, a young girl of nineteen years, plunged to her death from the extreme top of Madison Square Garden last Wednesday afternoon, April 2. The matinee crowd had just left the Garden. Miss Hackett, donning her practice togs, ascended to the top





of the Garden. She had hardly got to the top when she began doing stunts that seldom before had been attempted by a female aerialist. How it happened will never be known, but with a sharp scream she was seen to let go of the trap and plunged head-long downwards, landing on a platform used by the large ballet. A dozen hands reached to pick her up. The first to reach her side was William La Mont of the Bird Millman troupe. At a glance he noticed that the little lady was seriously injured. She was carried into the back office and an ambulance called. The doctor on arriving found that she had died shortly before. Miss Hackett had never appeared in public in an aerial act, but was considered one of the show's most competent riders. She was the daughter of Dr. Clarence L. Hackett of Forty-third street, New York. She was a big favorite with all the show people, and with her sister, also a rider, gave up a social position to accept a position with Barnum & Bailey three years ago. Circus life had always attracted her, and against the wishes of her parents, she took up the happy life of a circus rider. A huge floral piece, ten feet high, was sent to her home by the circus folks as a remembrance of her.

Milton sold "Paradise Lost" for \$100 in money. Poor Chatterton, one of the brightest minds of his day, committed suicide by jumping from London bridge into the river Thames. It was either this or starvation, and he accepted the former. His verses were a drug on the market. Literature was a poor bread winner in these days, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* observes, and men or women who depend upon literature today, unless success has crowned their efforts, stand a precarious chance of making a fortune. It is pleasant to call attention to certain facts recently brought to light in the recent divorce trial in which the wife of George H. Broadhurst sought separation and alimony. It was proved by the court that Broadhurst's income is \$125,000. This from the royalties on his plays alone. Clyde Fitch, who began life under very impoverished circumstances, left a fortune of \$250,000, and his plays are each year turning in a steady income to his estate. Walter Brown, who

wrote "Every Woman," knew what it was to starve. It is related that five months before "Every Woman" was produced, he wandered into a chop house in New York and met a party of friends. "If I could only raise \$50,000" he sighed. "What for?" was asked. "I would get a divorce," he replied. He did not get \$50, did not get a divorce. He died on the night of the first appearance of "Every Woman," and his widow received \$165,000 the first year in royalties from his play. Last fall a crop of manuscript novels was swelled by the statement that a \$10,000 prize for a novel had been won by Lena Dalrymple, a young girl Passaic. There is a fortune in the pen if the right hand directs it and the right mind is behind it. Literature is an uncertain field, but it is one rich in opportunity, a field which does not discriminate against sex. Fortunes have been made and fortunes will continue to be made by the fortunate writers of plays, poetry and ordinary fiction.

Marcus Loew, theater owner.

Official information was sent out by his New York office today that Marcus Loew had purchased the Sullivan-Considine circuit of theaters, comprising over fifty theaters throughout the West. The deal was completed late last night and early this morning at Kansas City, Mo. Mr. Loew directed the transfer in person while John Considine represented his interests, and the attorneys and trustees of the "Big Tim" Sullivan estate looked after their share. It is said that over \$5,000,000 is involved in the deal. The actual purchase price was not made public. Mr. Loew says that the purchase of the property will enable him to offer performers one hundred weeks of continuous work. This means practically work for a lifetime, as they can play it over again. This is the most extensive deal in the history of vaudeville and makes Marcus one of the great factors in that branch of the business. Hitherto he has been in control only in the east, Sullivan & Considine ruling only in

the west, but the outright purchase of the latter circuit puts Mr. Loew in absolute control of a circuit stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Mr. Loew's rise in theatricals has been truly phenomenal. He started eight years ago with penny arcades in Cincinnati and New York; bought the Royal Theater in Brooklyn seven years ago; enlarged his circuit to include twenty-two theaters in New York and many between that city and Toronto, until he had forty-seven theaters before he bought the Sullivan-Considine circuit.

#### April 25, 1914

N. B. By the Editor [of the *Gazette*]: In the following article Mr. Watt expresses regret that while he enjoyed every act of the great Ringling show in Chicago, still he missed something. He did not know whether it was the smell of the menagerie or what it was, but something was lacking. Mr. Watt forgets

that since the days when he began "trooping," driving from show town to show town, the times have changed. The old regime has passed to the days of memories. Today a circus is a business proposition, requires more management than one of the largest and best equipped manufactories in the country.

About three weeks ago I met a friend on the street who asked me if I wasn't going to Chicago to see the Ringling show. I told him possibly so some time before the close of the engagement. He said, "I would like to see the show in the Coliseum. I will make a bargain with you. I will pay the railroad fare and hotel bill if you furnish the tickets for the show." I accepted his offer and last Wednesday we left Janesville on the 3:20 train for Chicago to see the great show. We arrived in Chicago at 6:30, ate a hurry-up dinner and were soon on our way to the Coliseum. We arrived there a few minutes after 8 o'clock to find an immense crowd in front of the building and every desirable seat in the building taken. On leaving Janesville another friend joined us, so there were three of us in the party. I left my friends on the sidewalk and crowded my way into





the business office, where I met Lou Graham, one of the managers. The only Ringling with the show was AI, who was in the dressing room getting the show ready for the grand entry. Mr. Graham said, "Dave, every desirable seat is taken. If you had only telegraphed me yesterday, we would have been glad to have saved you the best seat in the house." At the same time he smiled, "Are you superstitious?" he continued. "We have box No. 13 with six chairs in it, but no one seems to want it." I said to Mr. Graham that I would sit in box 13 if it was Friday and the thirteenth of the month. These box seats sell for \$2 each, and when I found my friends on the sidewalk, I said to them, "I am not getting out of this very cheap myself," and that I had to pay \$2 each for these three seats. My friend who was financing the trip took a look at me and said, "Where are the elephants? Any time you would give \$2 apiece for seats, they would have to give you an elephant with each ticket." Mr. Graham then joined us and we were on the way to box 13. When we entered the box all the rubber-necks in the neighborhood were taking a look at the men who dared sit in box 13.

It was only a few minutes until AI Ringling received word that we were there and he immediately came over and shook hands and said he felt proud of the show to think that they were drawing people from a distance of nearly 100 miles. After visiting us for a minute or two he blew the whistle which was the signal for the grand entry to start, and Solomon and the Queen of Sheba made their appearance and the show was started.

There were hundreds of horses, camels and other animals in the grand march, all bedecked with wardrobes costing many thousands of dollars. It was said that there were over 1,000 people in this grand march. The wardrobe throughout was the finest that I ever saw, and the cost of this alone was no small fortune. At the finale of the grand march the production of Solomon and



Sixteen sheet poster of the Ringling Solomon and Sheba spec.

the Queen of Sheba was next on the program and in the opening of this production there were 350 dancers. This part of the entertainment lasted about thirty minutes, after which came the elephants in each of the three rings, and in a second more, they were all dancing the tango and hesitation waltz which made a great hit with the immense crowd. While there were not thrillers, as I might say, like the automobile making the loop, yet the show was high class from start to finish.

With thousands of glittering electric lights glittering on the spangled horses and performers, it was a sight that you could only see in a great building like that. There were thousands of beautifully gowned women and carefully groomed men which almost made one think he was attending grand opera instead of a circus. But with all this, to me there seemed to be something lacking, and whether it was the voice of the side show man and maybe the great canvas with the letters over the door, "Main Entrance," or possibly the chattering of monkeys in the cage just inside, or possibly the odor from the great menagerie, it did not seem quite like a circus to me. Or it might be that I have reached the age limit of enjoyment to a circus, or possibly have seen too many of them. I can well remember when I was a boy that I could go to a circus and enjoy every minute of it. A brick of popcorn would taste like angels' food, and a glass of lemonade like Mumm's Extra Dry; so when you sum it all up, I think to

really get the good out of a circus that we will have to turn back a few pages and be a boy once more.

Mr. Ringling told me that they expected to show in Janesville this year, possibly about the middle of July. I met Julius Turnour, the English clown, who made his first debut in this country with the Burr Robbins show in 1879. I asked Turnour if he did not think that the porterhouse steaks were a little thicker and juicier in America than they were in

England. He answered, "No, I don't think they are, but I think they are easier to get." And so they are, for Turnour is getting twice the money in American that he could get in the old country. But few of the European performers can be persuaded to come to this country, and then only under large salaries.

In looking over the program of the Hagenbeck & Wallace show which is in St. Louis this week, I found that the two principle riders with that show this season are Stick Davenport and his wife. John Davenport and his two boys, John and Stick, were with the Burr Robbins show in 1879 and 1880. Stick first learned to ride in the old Burr Robbins ring barn when he was but 9 or 10 years old, and his first appearance before an audience was in Janesville, riding a hurdle on two Shetland ponies. Today he and his wife are considered headliners in the business.

It is always a matter of pride to every old circus man to read of some act of kindness by members of the profession he loves so well. Down in New York the "Big Show," the Barnum & Bailey aggregation, also owned by the Ringlings, made merry at Bellevue hospital. I quote from a clipping relative to their afternoon there:

"About two-thirds of the acts appearing with the Barnum & Bailey show at Madison Square Garden journeyed over to Bellevue hospital Saturday morning, April 11, and gave a well balanced performance for the benefit of the several hundred patients.



"Ed Brill, with a band of some twenty pieces, supplied the music and was highly complimented on the excellent musical program he gave.

"The bill included: Sam Garrett, with his cowboy specialty; Tai Pien Chinese Troupe, in wonderful feats of magic; the three Hart Bros. gave a comedy performance that had the inmates in convulsions of laughter every second they occupied the stage. 'Flatiron' and Charles Ruffy, with several new clowning features put on just for the occasion, made one of the hits of the entertainment. The Three Arleys, with their remarkable perch act, made them sit up and take notice with their seemingly death-defying feats atop a thirty-foot pole.

"Sammy Nelson, Dan Ducrow, Herman Joseph, and Paul Jerome were also there with many special clowning features and put gladness into the hearts of many of the unfortunates. Pat Valdo, Phil King and Frank Hammer, a trio of funny men, were number ten on the program, and presenting many amusing stunts, held the center of attraction for many minutes.

"The Four Comrades, one of the best grotesque acrobatic quartets in the business, twisted themselves into many figures and received the greatest amount of applause that they have ever received since they were in the show business. Fred Bradna was director, Bum O'Sullivan, assistant, and E. H. Brill was musical director.

"The affair was voted by the inmates one of the best of its kind ever given in Bellevue and long will be remembered.

"Other clowns that made merry besides those already mentioned were 'Bohn' and Phil King who also were seen to good advantage with special material.

#### May 2, 1914

On Monday next, May the 4th, all the big shows of the country will be on the road and making the one-night stands. In show business you are not supposed to really be out for the season until you have left the large cities and get to making the one-night stands. Tonight, May the 2nd, closes the five days engagement of the great Ringling show in St. Louis; and from there they make a long Sunday run to Terre Haute,

Indiana, which will be their first one-day stand of the season. The Barnum, Show is making one-day stands in New York state. And tonight, May the 2nd, closes a two weeks' engagement of the Miller Bros.' 101 Ranch at the Madison Square Garden. The Sells-Floto and Buffalo Bill's show are in California making one-night stands. The Hagenbeck and Wallace show is in Indiana. And today, Saturday, May the 2nd, marks the opening of the Gollmar Bros. show in their home town in Baraboo, Wisconsin. This will

be a relief to everyone connected with the big shows as they would each rather be making the one-day stands on the road than be stationed in a large city for several weeks. Now as we are expecting the Ringling show in Janesville about the middle of July, I am going to rail the road for that day. Perhaps you don't understand what railing the road means.

In wagon show business years ago in long overland trips in a strange country, it was my business to go ahead and mark the road for the balance of the show to follow. And to do this I would take twenty or thirty shingles in my carriage and when I would come to four corners, if the route was straight ahead, I would drop a shingle at each side of the road, which meant for everybody to keep on straight ahead to a least the next four corners. If a turn had to be made there, I would drop a shingle straight ahead, one to the left or right of the four corners as the case might be. Yet I think nine times out of ten, the big teams following me, if the horses had their own way, they would make the turn themselves, for as a rule they seemed to know which way my team had gone.

Now if you are going to put in the day with the circus, get up and watch them unload at the Five Points where you can see the large, ponderous wagons lowered to the street with the ease of the lightest carriage; then follow the big tents, watch them drive the big stakes which hold up

the tents, all of which is done by machinery. See the great hotel under canvas, where they serve about fifteen hundred meals three times a day to their guests. All of these are interesting to watch and 'twas a wonder to me how they could build up a great city of tents, give two performances each day, take these down, move possibly one hundred miles, build up again and go through this routine of business every day for the year. It is certainly a sight worth seeing.



Julius Turnour on horse in spec.

The main office of the Ringling Bros. show is located on the north side in Chicago and is presided over the year round by David [Dan] E. Bugh [DeBaugh] who has been in the employ of the Ringlings for 17 or 18 years. It is the only

office maintained by the two great shows during the summer and it is here that all the office business is done.

Away back in the seventies a young man by the name of Louis Hart came to Janesville and for some time worked in a shoe factory on South Main Street which was located at that time where the Lewis Knitting Mills are now. Hart was an expert in handling machinery for both shoes and harnesses. At that time he and Charles and Millie Ricker of this city became warm friends, and up until this last winter, Louis Hart would often visit the Ricker boys at their home. Only last Fall he was here and spent a week as their guest. After leaving the shoe factory here Hart went to New York, and as he was a fast walker and a man of great endurance, a trainer in that line of work put Hart in shape to start in the six days walking contest in Madison Square Garden in New York City. A man by the name of O'Leary won the contest and O'Leary's share of the receipts was about twenty thousand dollars. Louis Hart finished second and received several thousand dollars as his share of the purse. This made him famous all over the country. From that time

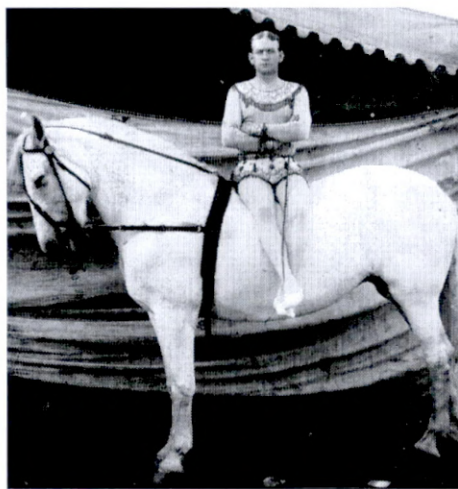


on he was known as "Heel and Toe Hart." Hart was a Frenchman by birth. Last summer his father died at his home in Spencer, Mass., at the age of 102 years. Louis Hart and a maiden sister were the only heirs. He left Janesville for his old home where he went at the solicitation of his sister to settle up the estate, which was said to be about sixty thousand dollars. Shortly after arriving at his old home, Louis was taken sick and a few weeks later died. Mr. Hart was 60 years of age and always had a warm spot in his heart for Janesville and friends that he made when he called Janesville his home.

Many Janesville and Beloit people will be grieved to learn of the death of Colonel D. H. Harris, which occurred at his home at Mendon, Mich. a short time ago. Colonel Harris was the husband and manager of Marantette high school horses which appeared at the fair in Beloit last fall. Col. D. H. Harris, manager and husband of Madam Marantette, the equestrienne, passed away at his home in Mendon, Mich., on Monday, April 6, aged 64 years, 5 months and 29 days. Mr. Harris had been in poor health for the past two or three years. Several weeks ago he was taken from his home in Mendon to the hospital at Kalarna Mich.; but after one week there, it was found that he was failing rapidly, and he was taken to his home. Death is said to have been due to a complication of heart, lung and bronchial disorders.

Col. Harris was born in Frankfurt, Ky. Oct. 7, 1849. After growing into manhood, he became a master horseman and for years was connected with the leading showmen of the world, such as Barnum, Forepaugh, Ringling, etc. in the purchase of their horses. In May 1882 he began his work with Madam Marantette, assuming the management of her business, and in October, 1895, they were united in marriage. Their travels have covered America and Europe. The funeral services were held at the home Wednesday afternoon, April 18, and the interment was made at the Mendon Cemetery.

From Liverpool, England, comes the report that Louis E. Cooke arrived here today on board the Mauretania. He will at once take up his duties as General Manager of the



Rider Albert M. "Stick" Davenport.

Miller Bros. and Arlington 101 Ranch Wild West production at the Shepherd's Bush Stadium of the Anglo-American Exposition which opens in May. Mr. Cooke is in full and complete control of the English interests of the 101 Ranch and will have the assistance of Johnny Baker as arenic director. The organization will be assembled in America by Miller Bros. and Arlington and will sail intact the latter part of this month or early in May. The English Exposition will carry the authorized backing and sanction of Miller Bros. and Edward Arlington and will be billed as 101 Ranch Wild West.

The return to activities of Mr. Cooke will be a subject of much gratification to his legion of friends in the circus business who feared that when the Two Bills Shows were dissolved last summer, it would mean his permanent retirement from the field in which he has been engaged for many years. Mr. Cooke goes to England fully equipped for the duties that will devolve to him as he was abroad with the Barnum & Bailey Circus several years ago and served in the executive capacity for that organization in planning and executing the greatly successful tour.

#### May 9, 1914

It was in 1847 that G. G. Gollmar and wife settled in Chicago on Jackson Boulevard where he bought a piece of property with the intention of making that city their home. Mr. Gollmar was a blacksmith and a wagon maker by trade. At that time Chicago was considered one of the

frontier towns of the country. Nearly everything between the lake and the river was a swamp and but few of the streets were passable with any kind of a heavy load.

Although his business opened up good and he had all the work he could possibly do, they had not been there long when he was taken with the fever and ague. Many weeks he said he put in as much time shaking as he did working. When he got the doctor and the prescription paid for, which was at that time principally whiskey and quinine, which seemed to be the only medicine for that disease, he had but little left to live on.

Although he bought property on Jackson Boulevard near where the Board of Trade building now stands, when Mr. Gollmar made up his mind to leave, there was no one to buy his property. So they covered a wagon and with an old pair of horses left their new home and started for the west, leaving their new home as there was no chance for them to sell it at any price. After many day's travel and going through a good many hardships, making some days not more than from twelve to fifteen miles, they finally landed in Baraboo, Wisconsin. There they found a small settlement and after two or three days of rest, they finally made up their minds to try again to build up a business and a home.

From that day to this G. G. Gollmar and his family have been prominent in all the business interests of Baraboo. Although Mr. Gollmar will be 92 years old his next birthday and his wife 87, they are still hale and hearty, living in the comfortable house where they located more than sixty years ago. They raised a family of nine boys and three girls of which seven sons and one daughter are still alive. One of the sons is a practicing physician at Kankakee, Ill. Two others have been in the manufacturing business in Baraboo for many years, both of whom have a comfortable fortune.

In 1891 the other four [actually five] sons started on a small wagon show known as Gollmar Bros. Although commenced in a small way, this show has been gradually built up year after year until 1903 when it required about 140 head of horses to take it over the country. That year,



although the show had been making plenty of money, they struck heavy rains and extreme heat out in Iowa where they found it almost impossible to make the towns, losing many of their horses. It was in August some time that they closed and brought the show back to its winter quarters in Baraboo where they immediately went to work remodeling it for a railroad show the coming season of 1904.

This year the show opened at its home town Saturday, May 2, with everything new and bright for the coming season. It was last Monday, May 4, that I attended the show in the afternoon in Fort Atkinson, Wis. Although it is not the largest in the world, for its size, it is the finest and best equipped show that I ever saw. The show is transported over the road in one train of twenty-three cars, all sixty feet in length and built expressly for the business. They carry five sleepers of the latest model. It is the first and only show in the world that is electric lighted from one end to the other. They have about 250 people and 150 head of work and ring horses which are as fine as any show in the country. They run two cook tents, one being the officers' tent and the other for the working people. The meals served in the two tents are just the same, the only difference being in the furnishings. Last Monday I had the pleasure of taking dinner with C. B. Gollmar and his wife. It was one which would have done credit to any \$2-a-day hotel in the country.

In the big tent they show in two rings and a platform, the canvas being 150 feet round top, with fifty-foot middle pieces and one thirty-foot middle piece. The seating capacity is about 5,000.

I arrived at the show about 9 o'clock in the morning and was soon spotted by Walter Gollmar, who is the equestrian director and general manager of the show when in operation. As he was the one busy man around the show, we had only gotten fairly started looking around when he was obliged to leave and turn me over to Tom Ford who is an old friend of mine.

Tom and I had traveled together with the Forepaugh show in the eighties. Ford was anxious to show me the side show which they felt very



The performing personnel of Gollmar Bros. Circus in 1892.

proud of. When we were in the side show, the Hindu snake charmer, after taking a long look at me and knowing that I was a friend of the Gollmar people, was anxious to show me his den of snakes. As I was never very much on snakes, I told him that down in my town people who had snakes did not stand very well socially. So we passed on to the skeleton and the fat woman. Finally the side show opened with a minstrel performance of real colored men.

We passed on to the main entrance of the big tent and there met John White who for many years has had charge of the main entrance and the ticket takers of the show. John White and I traveled together in 1881 with the Burr Robbins show. John told me on Monday that he had never missed a day since that time. John is as high class a door tender as was ever in the business. It is said of him that he can tell if a youngster is thirty days under or over twelve years of age. When on duty at the front door, his friends and foes are all alike to him. It is a ticket or its equivalent with John from spring until fall.

The one old friend that I missed at the show was Emery Stiles, the boss animal man, who has been with the Gollmars ever since they had a show. Before leaving Baraboo, Emery had the misfortune to fall in the clutches of a large grizzly and was left back in the hospital at Baraboo for repairs. They expect him to be able to join the show in a couple of weeks. A few years ago Emery was left a fortune of about \$40,000 which is well invested. While he is amply able to live without work, he seems to like the life and says he will stay with the show

for a few years at least.

Frank Palmer, an old Janesville boy, is assistant boss hostler and has been with the Gollmars for several years. His family live on High Street in the first ward.

The business staff of the Gollmar show is: Charles A. Gollmar, manager; B. R., treasurer; Fred C. advance agent and railway contractor; and Walter, equestrian director.

The first year as a railroad show everything was carried in nine cars. These were of the ordinary length, while today they have twenty-three cars, each sixty feet in length.

J. D. Hollinger is leader of the band, which is composed of twenty-five pieces. Mr. Hollinger's home is at Mount Carroll, Ill. This is his sixth year with the Gollmar show as bandmaster.

One of the aerial acts of the show is the Herbert flying troupe. Tom Herbert, the head of the troupe, is an old Forepaugh and Barnum man, and was one of the famous Herbert brothers in the eighties. Today Tom has one of the best aerial acts of any show in the country.

When talking with a friend from Racine a few days ago I asked him if any of the Costellos were living in Racine. Nearly fifty years ago Daniel Costello, who was at that time a partner of P. T. Barnum in what was known as the Barnum & Costello Hippodrome, was famous all over the country. For about three years the show made a world of money. Daniel Costello built a beautiful home on a high bluff in Racine overlooking Lake Michigan, and at that time it was said to be one of the finest residences in the west. For many years it was pointed out to visitors to Racine with much pride. Dan Costello died a couple of years ago, but his wife still



lives with her son Harry in Racine. Several years ago, the old home was sold to Waeley Bull, a wealthy Racine manufacturer. It has been remodeled and changed in many ways, but it is pointed out to visitors as the old Costello home.

While the running of a circus is a busy life, both the Gollmars and Ringlings always have time to entertain their friends and the best they have is none too good for them. The late Mrs. Ringling, mother of the Ringling brothers, and Mrs. Gollmar, mother of the Gollmar brothers, are sisters, and for nearly half a century lived side by side in the same block in Baraboo, Wis. While Mother Ringling died some years ago, Mother Gollmar is still living, and both lived to see the ambition of their sons realized.

#### May 16, 1914

Did it ever occur to you on circus days when everything seemed to be lit up like a bonfire and everyone around you seemed supremely happy, that possibly there was some one connected with the circus who was not getting the pleasure out of it that you were? This is often the case in the circus business.

It was only a few weeks ago that Colonel George Harris, husband of Madame Marintette, died at his home in Mendon, Mich. Colonel Harris' death came suddenly. Along early in the winter they had made an engagement for the season of 1914 with the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch at Madison Square Garden, New York City. Colonel Harris and his wife, with their high school horses, were one of the features of the great show and were billed all over New York City as headliners. It was only some three or four weeks before the opening of the show that Colonel Harris died. It was necessary that this engagement be kept and a substitute had to be found to take Mr. Harris' place with his wife in working the horses.

A letter from Mrs. Harris a short time ago said that this was the hardest two weeks' work of her whole life. She and Mr. Harris were married in the early eighties and had traveled in almost every civilized country in the world. As they had no children, the husband and wife meant much to each

other. They were one of the features of the Barnum show for some years in Europe. They traveled in their own private car. While Mrs. Harris worked afternoon and evening in the show, she did all her own work in the private car where they made their home. After the death of the husband it was hard for the wife to muster up courage enough to go into New York City and fill the engagement. While she bowed and smiled her acknowledgment of appreciation, it was often between tears. After her helpmate for nearly forty years in the work had gone, Madame Marintette declared that this will be the last season for her in the business.

It was along in the middle eighties that Millie Turnour, a balancing trapeze woman from England, was with the Forepaugh show when one day she received a telegram announcing the death of her daughter, a girl of sixteen, who was attending school in Philadelphia. She was riding with some friends after a spirited team when suddenly the horses got frightened and ran away. This telegram was received after the afternoon's performance and as it was impossible for her to get a train until late at night, Mrs. Turnour did her act in the evening without the audience ever knowing the terrible strain under which she was working. After an absence of a week at home to attend the funeral of her daughter, Madame Turnour returned to her work and finished the season.

Along about a year or two later the Fisher brothers were doing a flying aerial act with the show, finishing up with a double somersault from one side of the canvas to the other. While they always worked with a safety net beneath them, young Fisher in doing

The Charlie Fisher flying trapeze act in 1914.



his double somersault missed his calculation and went over the net and struck a stake on the ground. He was carried back to the dressing room and taken from there to the hospital where he died the following day. It was whispered among the audience that this was probably done on purpose. The brother kept on tumbling. One act was in the ring and so far as the audience knew, nothing of a serious nature had happened.

All this goes to show that at times there is a sad fate awaiting many in the circus business. It is while the audience is having the time of their life and enjoying every minute of the time that the sad part comes to those connected with the show.

Some three or four weeks ago Helen Ware, a famous actress, was touring the country in a show called *Within the Law*. They had a week's engagement in Columbus, O. The warden of the state penitentiary in that city attended the performance one evening. After the performance the warden said, "I would like to meet Miss Ware or her manager." His object was to ask her to bring her company to the penitentiary and give the inmates a matinee performance in the afternoon. The warden was so taken with the play that he thought it would teach a lesson to the prisoners. Miss Ware readily consented to do this. On Thursday afternoon of that week they gave the show to 1,800 of the inmates of the Ohio State penitentiary. After the performance Miss Ware said that this was one of the largest as well as one of the most appreciative audiences they ever had. The death room of the penitentiary was used as a dressing room for the ladies and the electrocuting room for the men's dressing room. Taking it all in all, it was a novel as well as a sad way of giving a show. After the performance the warden gave the entire company a banquet in the private dining room. Miss Ware and her company expressed gratitude for the pleasant way in which they had spent the afternoon. They left hoping that the lesson they had taught might do some good.

A few evenings ago I was visiting with Connie McDonald and the conversation drifted into hotels and landlords whom I had



met in different parts of the country when in the show business. Among others whom I mentioned was A. V. H. Pantland of Jackson, Mich., and later of Grand Rapids, Mich. When I mentioned these names Connie brightened up and said, "That's where I first commenced working at my business with Mr. Pantland at Jackson, Mich., at the Hibbard house. Mr. Pantland's first venture was in a restaurant at Marshall, Mich. Later he took the Hibbard house in Jackson, Mich., where he also ran a restaurant at the depot.

The Hibbard house in Jackson was an old building but was known all over the country for its good table and cleanliness. It was along in 1875 that the Morton house of Grand Rapids was built and then it was one of the finest hotels in the west. Mr. Pantland leased this hotel and opened it in the fall of 1875. It soon became famous all over the country. At the Hibbard house in Jackson, Mr. Pantland's son, Boyd, was his night clerk at a salary of \$16 per month. After taking the Morton house at Grand Rapids, young Boyd Pantland married Mr. Morton's daughter. From that time he was the acting manager of the Morton house. In 1882, when with the Forepaugh show, we were billed to show in Ionia, Mich., on a Saturday and at Grand Rapids on Monday. On Friday night a terrible rain storm came and flooded Ionia, so it was impossible for us to show there and we missed the town and went on to Grand Rapids where my wife met me on Sunday morning. While at Grand Rapids we stopped at the Morton house. When Sunday's dinner was ready, the head waiter informed me that Mr. Pantland had arranged a table over in one corner of the dining room for two, and my wife and I were to be the two. The table was beautifully decorated with flowers. The head waiter said that this was done by Mr. Pantland for the sake of old times. The dinner which we were served in this quiet corner of the dining room would have done credit to Delmonico's famous restaurant in New York City. Mr. Pantland was a typical landlord for he seldom forgot a face or a name. He seldom took his eyes from the lesson, so he seldom lost his place.

I can get a little pleasure out of the

past with these rehearsals. The present address of the second cook at the Morton house at that time is 7 South Main street, Janesville, Wisconsin.

#### May 23, 1914

Modern circuses are run on a far different basis from what they were fifty years ago. The oldtime hardships of night travel on jolting wagons or carriages to the next stand are past and gone. Instead of fifteen or twenty-mile jumps, they take eighty and a hundred and even more, the circus crew riding in sleepers, pulled by the biggest and best equipped engines of the line they happen to be traveling over.

There is no unhitching of the teams from one wagon to help pull a second one stuck fast in a muddy road; no delays for rains or washed out roads; no tired elephants plodding along pushing when called upon when horse flesh refused to budge the heavy cages. It is all run on a different basis.

The smell of the circus is different, too. You older people remember the new turned ring, the sod neatly piled up around the border, the sawdust scattered on the inside. Why, they have even done away with that. Now they have big circular wooden rings that come in sections and are laid down and taken up when finished without throwing the sod back. True, the sawdust is there, but the smell of the fresh earth is gone.

Ella Bradna on Barnum & Bailey.

The acts are different. You can remember how they led in a camel or two and then the tumblers appeared on the top of the long running board and took a start and turned most amazing somersaults over the backs of the animals. Then in came an elephant, then another, sometimes three or four, and over these the daring tumblers plunged, turning once, twice and sometimes three times in the air and landing safely on the big soft cushion on the other side, amid the plaudits

of the audience. Even the clowns took their turns. Sometimes they made the jump, but more often they climbed from the back of one animal to the next and then jumped off and everybody laughed.

These jumpers are things of the past. They have vanished as has the road show, and in their places come aerial acts, trapeze performances that are most hazardous and exciting. The old timers of the business are retiring, their places being taken by a younger generation; but the *New York Evening Post* finds that this younger generation of successful circus entertainers are descendants of the old timers that delighted the elder generation in their childhood and whose names stand for the days when a circus was a circus, not a corporation. The *Post* says: "One hears a great deal about the aristocracy of the stage, but little of the aristocracy of the sawdust and spangles. The reason for this, perhaps, is that the circus is not always in the public eye, while the stage is omnipresent. With the circus the season is short and quickly does it spread its wings and cover the country. The real aristocracy of the amusement, world, however, is found in the circus.

"I saw you ride the other night," said a young woman in a group that met Ella Bradna after a performance of the Barnum & Bailey circus. "I wish I could ride as well as you do; I think you are a really great equestrienne."

"Thank you," replied Miss Bradna. "My maternal grandmother was a really great equestrienne." The flash in her eye denoted the great pride she felt in her lineage. While the aristocracy of the stage is fast becoming a memory, this is due to the changes made by time. In the old stock days actors made long stops in cities, did not live

nomadic lives and had homes. Their children seemed to fit naturally into the theatrical groove. When the era of travel came in and the actor had no settled abode for any length of time, he either did not marry, or if he did and had children, they were kept





away from the influence of the playhouse.

"Conditions with the circus today, however, are practically the same as they have always been. It is a form of entertainment that is given in large part of families. There are circus performers whose first playgrounds were the old earth-backed rings. The performer who cannot go back at least two generations in his circus ancestry is a fledgling. In speaking of the aristocracy of the circus no mention of it should be complete without a reference to the Robinsons. Old Yankee Robinson at one time had the largest circus in the world. John Robinson, still hale and hearty, was the first man to drive and handle four horses in a ring. The wonder of all the Robinson family and, in fact, of the circus world in his day, was James Robinson [no relation to the other Robinsons]. They called him champion bareback rider of the world, and when James A. Bailey took the Barnum [Cooper & Bailey] show to Australia, he paid Robinson a salary of \$500 a week payable in gold. When Robinson was 60 years old, he rode in the circus arena and turned somersaults on the back of a running horse. He is still living, rugged and well.

"The Davenports, May, Victoria and Orrin, are well known circus artists. Orrin's father, John Davenport, was one of the stars of his day and so was his grandfather, Henry. Lupeta Perea, a Spanish girl who does an amazing single back trapeze act, traces her circus lineage back four generations. At one time her grandfather owned and managed a small circus in Spain while she received her training in old Mexico under her father, at one time a performer. John Ducander, perhaps the most accomplished high school horseman in the world, at one time owned a small traveling circus in Russia. Meeting with business reverses, he was for a number of years riding instructor under the patronage of the czar. Later his services were utilized by Count Ahnfelt of Finland. Ducander's people for generations back have been horse trainers and circus performers, and he is one of the most eminent members of the circus Sorosis.

"One might go almost through the

entire program of the Barnum & Bailey circus and find names which for generations past have stood for all that was best in the circus world and find also that their descendants were doing their prettiest to keep alive the best traditions of the family name and fame."

It is reported that Albert Ringling, aged 65, eldest of Ringling brothers, the world's greatest circus proprietors, and a resident of Baraboo for thirty-five years, has filed suit for divorce. Mr. and Mrs. Ringling have been married forty years. They have no children, but lived an ideally happy life up to about a year ago when Alf T. Ringling was divorced on a technical charge of non-support. Mrs. Alf T. Ringling received a very generous cash settlement after her husband had arranged not to fight the case, nearly

\$1,000,000, it was said. Be that as it may, it was ample and all she asked. The papers in the Albert Ringling case are sealed, and the grounds on which the suit is based are not known. Various rumors are flying about, but the one most generally credited is that which has it that differences first arose over Alf T. Ringling's troubles. There has always existed between the Ringling brothers a strong bond of affection. They might differ among themselves, but they always stood up for one another. It was brotherly regard, moreover, and not business interests that cemented them, for when A. G. Ringling, a brother who was not a member of the firm, but merely an employee, died some two years since, his family was provided for most munificently. Alf T. is much younger than Albert, and being of a winning disposition is a great favorite of his elder brother. It is presumed that the latter resented criticism aimed at him, and then when it was persisted in, the brotherly bond proved stronger than the marriage tie. Albert Ringling is one of the finest men alive. As men go, he averages away up. He was always exceptionally clean, uniformly kind and carefully considerate. His tastes are as simple as his fortune is huge. He will

have the sympathy and moral support of every man that knows him. The consensus of opinion is that Mrs. Ringling is a good woman and a faithful wife who has been very, very badly advised.

George Cochran, formerly adjuster of Ringling Brothers' shows and also in the past connected with the Hagenbeck-Wallace shows, died at Independence, Kas. May 6 of blood poisoning. Mr. Cochran was a trooper of the old school, highly respected by his employers, loved by his associates, and his demise will cause a pang in the hearts of his acquaintances who are numbered by the thousands. At the time of his death Mr. Cochran was proprietor of the Santa Fe hotel at Independence, Kas., and always had a smile and the latch strong out for the trooper, regardless of his financial condition. We join with his many friends in extending condolence and sympathy to the bereaved wife and family.

Albert Ringling.



The Wild West bunch is very proud of the fact that they had the honor of showing to President Wilson and party Tuesday evening, May 5.

It is a rare honor for any show to play host to the president of the United States and to have him stay for the concert is something heretofore unheard of. Well, the answer is our watchword; i. e., "The Greatest Show on Earth."

#### May 30, 1914

That the average show has its own troubles and meets with many obstacles, especially in the early part of the season, is evident by the troubles that the Robinson show of Cincinnati has been going through in different towns in its own state. The rains poured down day after day and at times it was impossible for them to show; and in one town at least the performers' trunks in the dressing room were floating around in water more than a foot deep. Many a performer declared that it would be his or her last season with the tented



shows. "Me for the hall shows after this," was heard many a time, and then when these troubles are over and the sun shines for a few days, these resolutions for the most part are forgotten. After the long winter and many times a short bank account, the average performer is not only ready, but anxious to take the road again.

The Robinson [Famous] show got into Barberton, Ohio, early Sunday a. m. with the sun shining and the lot dry. Everything was fine until the Monday matinee performance when it rained nearly all the afternoon to 5 o'clock. Things started to clear up and look bright for the evening performance. The tent was filled at 8 o'clock and the grand entry had just taken place when one of the hardest wind and rain storms came up that Barberton has seen in many a day. It rained so hard and the wind blew so strong that nearly everyone in the tents was on the hippodrome track to keep from getting wet. The water poured in the opening between the side walls and the big top in buckets. Owing to the confusion the show was not able to finish and the concert and all were over at 9:15. The dressing room tent was one pond of water. It looked as if the show would not get to the lot until daybreak.

The next stand was Ravenna, Ohio, on Tuesday, and on account of getting in there so late, there was no parade. In the afternoon the heavy rain which was still continuing cut short the performance. Water on the inside of the tent stood in pools ten to fifteen inches. The tents were tom down after the afternoon performance and the program for the evening abandoned. In regaining the sidewalk after the afternoon performance, spectators waded in water shoe-top deep. Steve Miaco says this is the last season for him with a tent show. Equestrian Director Miller, and

I guess everyone connected with the show, thought the same thing.

On Saturday, May 9, this show was billed to play Galion, Ohio. When an attempt was made to drive in on the lot, there were several soldiers stationed there. It seems that some carnival company had leased all the vacant lots, even the one that the Robinson show had contracted for. It looked as if there would be no show that day, but on investigation it was learned that the militia had been called out by the mayor and not by the state, so this did not hold good.

It was 9 o'clock before the first wagon was on the lot. Charles Fick, purchasing agent with the show, said he never saw a big top go up so quickly. Everything was in fine shape in two hours and the parade went out on time at 11 a. m.

A 1914 Robinson newspaper ad.

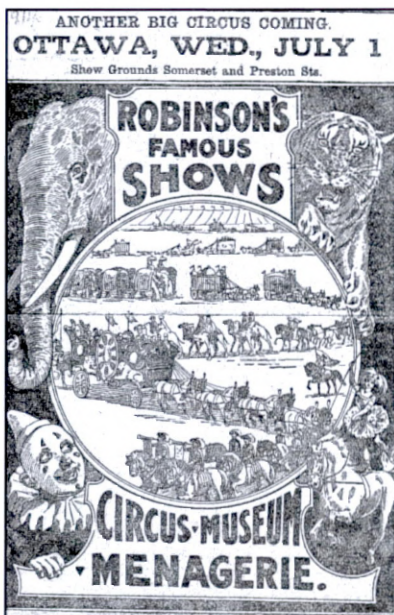
The Robinson show had to pay a county fee of \$60 besides city license at Barberton, when it exhibited there Monday, May 11. This law was

made some thirty or more years ago when a great many wagon shows were on the road. The law never having been changed, of course the Robinson show was the victim. The county fee had not been collected for twenty years before from any tent show. The county treasurer and deputy auditor from Akron drove to Barberton, ten miles from Akron, Monday afternoon and collected the \$60.

Charley McLean, who for many years was identified as superintendent of canvas with the Barnum & Bailey and Buffalo Bill shows, is now associated with P. A. McHugh in the grand stand and seating business in the capacity of superintendent of construction. He is in St. Louis in charge of erecting 45,000 seats, seven large tents and six smaller ones for the pageant and masque to be held

on Art Hill in Forest Park, May 28-31.

A few days ago a letter from Peter Conklin, one of the old-time clowns, appeared in a magazine, telling of his early experiences and how he first started in the business. This letter will prove of much interest to many in Janesville, especially the older citizens, for it was in the late 70's that Pete Conklin was the principal clown of the Burr Robbins show, and Mr. Conklin for a time made Janesville his headquarters. In the days of the one-ring show the clown was one of the principal features. His letter says: "As I was seated in my comfortable home, 1776 West Eighth street, Brooklyn, N. Y., on the forty-third anniversary of my marriage with my wife and son, Peter Jr., my daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Floyd H. Fox and their two sons and brother George and his wife, One of the boys asked me to tell them how I started in the circus business and whether I was always a clown. No, I didn't start in as a clown. I was raised in Cincinnati which was one of the greatest circus towns in those days, and boylike, I was much interested in the circus. So my pals and I used to practice tumbling. We got so that we could tumble as well as the best of them. I was very anxious to get into the circus business and was full of ambition. One day as I was walking by the Western Museum on Sycamore Street, I noticed a card in the window, 'Boy Wanted.' I walked in and offered my services. The manager said he wanted a boy to beat the bass drum. He asked me if I had ever beaten a bass drum. I said, 'No but it wouldn't take me long to learn.' So he gave me a trial and I made good and I've been following the bass drum ever since. In spring all circuses opened and there was great opposition. There was old John Robinson's circus, Spalding & Rogers' and Johnson & May's. Dan Rice was the clown with Spalding & Rogers. To outdo other shows he advertised to pass all children in free. W. F. Walleth was the clown and jester with Johnson & May's circus. So Walleth, not to be outdone by Dan Rice, advertised to pass in all children free, especially all boys that could tumble. So three of us, Sam Reinhardt, Amer Richardson and I





went to the circus, and I was spokesman. I said to Wallett, 'We see by the papers that you are going to pass in all boys who can tumble.' He asked, 'What can you do?' I started in and turned a row of flip-flops and a somersault which astonished him. He said, 'You are all right; can the others do as well?' And they did just the same. He passed us in, gave us a seat near the ring, and just before the great tumbling act went into the ring, he took us into the dressing room and made us take off our shoes and roll up our pants. He then took us back in the ring and introduced us to the audience, and in his announcement, he said he wanted to show the people of Cincinnati just what great talent they had. Well, we went into the act, got rounds of applause and made a great hit. He asked our names and said if we stuck to the business we would make our mark. I took his advice and took my brother in with me and we practiced a brother act. And our first engagement was with Major Brown's circus in 1859. I started in as a clown with Mabie's circus where I succeeded Tony Pastor. Since, I have traveled with all the leading shows from John Robinson's to Barnum & Bailey's. In 1866 I was engaged to open with Forepaugh & O'Brien's show in Philadelphia to appear in the same ring with Dan Rice and W. F. Wallett, two of the greatest clowns of the day. Dan Rice was the great American clown and Wallett was the Queen of England's jester. I had not met Mr. Wallett since I was a boy in Cincinnati. He was very much surprised when he found out that I was one of the boys he had passed in the circus for tumbling. He remembered me then and said, 'Well, well, now you are a big man and playing clown in the same ring with me, and you have made your mark.' He had me go into the ring with him and the old jester with tears in his eyes told the story to the audience. The clowns were the feature of the show, and they both did their best, told their very best jokes, and it was no small task to go into the ring after these two famous artists and especially as it was my first appearance in Philadelphia. I played for Charlie Fish's act, and to be noticed, I had to work up something new. I went into

the ring with a hurrah and a round of flip-flops and a high back somersault which so differed from the other jesters that I caught on big. Mr. Fish was a first-class trick rider, but very uncertain. On this night he wanted to do something extra, to turn a somersault on one foot over an object, a very difficult feat. He tried and failed and I made excuses, saying the horse was running bad and the ring was bad, etc., until the audience began to get tired. But Mr. Fish was determined to do that feat, so I helped him out. I said to the ringmaster, Tom King, 'I know just where the fault lies. It isn't the horse's fault, it isn't the rider's fault, nor the fault of the ring.' So the ring master said, 'If you know where the fault is, please tell us.' I led him in front of the orchestra and pointed to the man with the big horn and said, 'Every time he blows in that he blows Mr. Fish off his horse.' Then the ring master said to the man with the big horn, 'Please don't blow into that horn until Mr. Fish has accomplished this great feat.' Then Fish astonished everyone by doing the trick while the audience applauded. This little raise of mine made me a great favorite in Philadelphia. Several years ago I was walking on Broadway and met a gentleman who greeted me cordially. I didn't remember him until he said, 'Why I'm the man you said blew Charlie Fish off the horse.'

"I traveled with Dan Rice's show in 1879. We played clown for the same act which was the feature of the show. Dan Rice would go into the ring fast and tell several jokes and his troubles. He would say, 'I've been reported dead, but I still alive. They tried to rob me of my name, but they couldn't do it because it's blown in the bottle. I've been married three times and I've got sense enough to sleep alone.' He would sing a verse of a song. Then he would say, 'What is the use of me trying to sing; I'll introduce my young friend, Peter Conklin.' I would enter the ring and

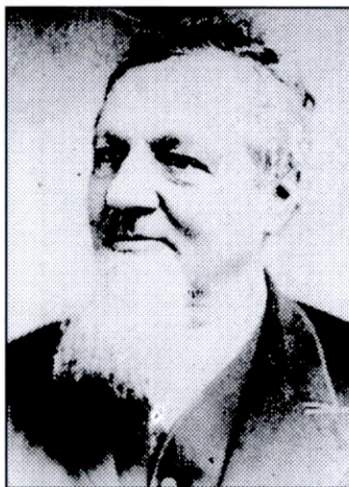
finish the act.

"In our travels we struck many temperance towns. Dan was always used to taking his 'night cap' before he retired. Once we struck a town where there was no liquor to be had. So Dan said, 'Peter I must have my night cap; you try to find someone that has some liquor.' After inquiring I found the only man who had liquor in the whole town. He was a banker. So I told Dan. He wondered how we could get to him. I suggested that the best way would be to serenade him. Dan said, 'That's good.'

"I got the band and after the show we went to the banker's house and serenaded him. Charlie Devere, the ballet singer, sang *Shall Old Acquaintance be Forgot*. The banker raised his window, wondering what it was all about. Dan said, 'I've brought my boys over to give you a little serenade.' The banker came down and

invited us in. Dan soon told him that he had understood that he (the banker) was the only man in town who had any liquor, and he (Dan) had always been used to having his night cap before retiring.

Old Dan Rice, clown and circus owner.



"The banker said, 'Yes, I have always been in the habit of

keeping a little liquor in the house in case of sickness.' Dan claimed not to be feeling well, so the banker brought in the demijohn, put it on the table and said, 'Gentlemen, this is real estate whiskey, one drink will make you feel as if you owned the country.' The demijohn was one with willow around it.

"I said to Charlie Devere, 'Sing that beautiful ballad *Under the Willow She is Sleeping*. We all had a drink and Dan sang *Mr. Jolly Jack Rever*. We had a little more 'real estate' and I sang *Little Brown Jug*. We had a little more 'tea,' then we finished up by singing *He's a Jolly Good Fellow*. We bid the banker good-night and Dan went home happy with his night cap."





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